BONANZA

D. S. Hawley

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A STORY OF THE GOLD TRAIL

BY

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AUTHOR OF

A MAN FOUR SQUARE,
CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT,
TROUBLED WATERS, ETC.

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The giants with hopes audacious; the giants of iron limb;
The giants who journeyed westward when the trails were new and dim;
The giants who felled the forests, made pathways o'er the snows,
And planted the vine and fig tree where the manzanita grows;

Who swept the mountain gorges, and painted their endless night,
With their cabins rudely fashioned and their camp-fires' ruddy light;
Who builded great towns and cities, who swung the Golden Gate,
And hewed from the mighty ashlar the form of a sovereign state.

I drink alone in silence to the builders of the West—
"Long life to the hearts still beating, and peace to the hearts at rest"

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CHAPTER I

THE PONY EXPRESS RIDER

FAR as the eye could see lay a rough and broken desert of sage. It stretched to the edge of a flat and arid world.

In front of the long one-story adobe station a man waited, eyes turned to the west. His hand rested on the flat straight back of a spirited chestnut horse. Byers was small and wiry, hard as nails. His high-heeled boots, buckskin breeches, flannel shirt, and skull cap had all been chosen for utility and not for looks. He wasted no energy in useless protest, but the fat station keeper who leaned against the door jamb and chewed tobacco knew he was seething with impatience. The wrangler holding a second saddled horse knew it, too. For the pony express rider from Carson was late and his delay was keeping Byers from starting on the next lap of the trans-continental journey.

The fat man sang lugubriously and tunelessly in a

voice that had been created solely for his own amusement.

"Old Grimes is dead, that good old man,
We ne'er shall see him more.
He wore a single-breasted coat,
All buttoned down before."

The wrangler looked at him reproachfully and murmured, "Durned if he wouldn't sing at a wake and spoil everybody's enjoyment."

"His heart was open as the day,
His feelin's all were true.
His hair it was inclined to gray,
He wore it in a queue,"

intoned the vocalist.

"Not news," the wrangler told himself bitterly. "I done heard all them interestin' details two hundred and seventy-three times." Aloud, he attempted a diversion. "Len' me a loan of a chew of tobacco, Jim."

The station keeper dived into his left hip pocket, produced a ragged plug, and offered it to his helper. Meanwhile he gave further information about the wearing apparel and physical idiosyncrasies of one Grimes, defunct.

"Wonder what's holdin' Tim," the stableman interposed at the end of another stanza.

"He ain't been late before in a blue moon. I don't recollect as he ever was late," answered the

fat man, drawn momentarily from his rhymed epitaph.

Byers said nothing.

The habit of the hard-riding pony express messengers of Russell, Majors, and Waddell was to be ahead of schedule. Each man prided himself on covering his relay under the assigned number of hours. The mounts supplied were chosen for speed, stamina, and heart; the men for gameness, resource, and knowledge of the country. To be late was contrary to the tradition of the service.

The pony express was a triumph of American pluck and energy. It stretched from St. Joseph to San Francisco, two thousand miles through the heart of the Indian country. The enterprise included five hundred superb horses, nearly two hundred stations, a hundred riders. The men in the little racing saddles were stripped to the last ounce. For protection they carried only a knife and a revolver. The mail bags never weighed more than twenty pounds. Each letter was written on thin tissue paper. The postage on the smallest was five dollars. Between the Missouri and Sacramento the time-table called for ten days, but often the pouches moved two hundred miles toward their destination in twenty-four hours.

Those in the saddle had to be man size in soul. No weaklings ever applied for this job. Some of those in the service were outlaws, for court warrants

did not reach into the sage. Many were desperadoes.[1] But few of them were quitters. They played out the hand that had been dealt them.

"Tim's sure late," the wrangler said hurriedly, for he saw signs of a return to music which did not soothe his savage breast.

"Kid McClintock's early. Hour ahead of his schedule," the station keeper replied.

Far away to the east a small cloud of dust rose from the sage and greasewood. Almost at the same time a second billow of yellow alkali appeared in the sunset glow of the opposite horizon.

The fat man grumbled. "Hell's hinges! That accident to Meighan is liable to shoot the whole schedule up. Tim'll have to double back to Carson in his place. I'll have him dig us up another man there."

The rider from the east arrived at the station first. He pulled up beside the wrangler, leaped to the ground, and at the same time reached for the tie straps which fastened the flat leather mail pouches to the saddle. Two minutes was allowed for the change of sacks from one horse to another, but

[1]This was more true of the station keepers and the attendants than of the stage drivers and pony express messengers. Slade, the notorious man killer, was superintendent of a division at Julesburg, Colorado. He succeeded Jules, whom he murdered in cold blood. Slade ruled his crew of wild assistants with an iron fist. He was an able and efficient servant of the company. Later he was hanged by the vigilantes in Montana. Legends of the country, probably much exaggerated, credit him with having killed thirty men.—W. M. R.

usually the transfer was made in ten seconds. The messenger, a long lean boy, swept the pouches deftly from one saddle to the other.

"Where's Meighan?" he asked.

"Done bust his laig tryin' to gentle that sorrel mustang. Tim Keefe will have to take his run tonight."

"Where's Tim?"

"Not in yet. There's his dust." The station keeper waved a fat hand toward the sunset.

Byers had been watching intently the dust cloud moving through the brush. "Something's wrong," he said briefly.

Hugh McClintock looked. The approaching horse was off the trail. Its gait was peculiar. Plunging unsteadily in spurts, it was weaving from side to side. Instead of a rider, a sack seemed to be prone in the saddle.

McClintock ran forward and caught the bridle of the unsteady horse. The flank of the animal was clotted with a splash of dust and blood.

The sack slid from the saddle as the horse shied. The sack was a man who had been clinging feebly to the mane of the bay. He groaned.

"Piutes—this side the Silver Mountains," he whispered, and fainted.

The station manager, the wrangler, and McClintock gave him first aid. An arrow head, deeply imbedded, projected from the flesh back of the shoulder.

One of the rider's boots was filled with blood, due to a bullet which had shattered the ankle.

Byers spent no time in helping with the wounded man. He had other business. If the Indians got a messenger, that was in the day's work. The mails had to go through without delay. He transferred the pouches to his own saddle, swung on, and galloped into the desert.

Kid McClintock rose. He, too, must be on his way, for there was nobody else to carry the mail to Carson City.

"I'll be movin'," he said briefly.

"Looks like you're elected," agreed the fat man, following the boy to a water olla where the young fellow washed his baked throat, drank deeply, and filled his canteen. "Not much use wishin' advice on you. It's a gamble, o' course. Injuns may be anywhere. But I reckon maybe you better swing to the south and hit the Walker River range. They're liable to be watchin' the trail for you."

"I reckon."

The boy moved to the fresh horse, spurs dragging and jingling. He had done his day's work. The horse upon which he had ridden in, lathered with sweat and still breathing deep from a long fast run, was mute testimony of this. The dry powdery dust of the desert covered every inch of the young rider. His legs were stiff and his shoulders tired. But the spring of splendid youth trod in his stride.

He had before him more than another hundred miles of travel, through a country infested by hostile savages. He might get through alive or he might not. That was on the knees of the gods. He had to take what came. More than once he had run a gauntlet of redskins. He had been a target for their arrows and their slugs. Tim was not the first messenger he had seen bring in on his person souvenirs of their missiles. The one salient point was that the mail had to go through. It always had reached its destination—always but once. On that occasion the messenger offered the only acceptable excuse for his failure. He lay dead on the trail, his scalp gone.

McClintock shot westward in a cloud of dust. Half a mile from the station he swung sharply to the south.

CHAPTER II

"HURRAH FOR WASHOE!"

PLACERVILLE was busy as a hive of bees on a warm June afternoon. Its hotels and restaurants were crowded to capacity. The saloons were doing a rush business and the gambling halls teemed with a packed and jostling humanity. Grocery stores bustled with the activity of clerks filling orders, packing supplies, nailing up boxes, and sewing bales. The main streets were filled with mixed crowds of miners, speculators, gamblers, men of leisure then known as "bummers," and such flotsam as is always washed up in the stampede for a new mining camp.

Vaqueros drove loaded mules and burros through the streets with soft liquid oaths of command. A sixteen-horse ore wagon, painted red, the bed of it six feet deep, rumbled down the road with two "back-actions" behind, each of these also filled with ore. They had come straight from the diggings at Virginia City. Freight outfits were loading at stores and wholesale liquor houses with supplies for the new camp. Men bought and sold hurriedly. A

hundred outfits were being roped up to cross the Sierras to the Carson Valley. Ox teams swung into town and out again with goods for the new district. Everywhere was that orderly confusion of many cross currents of humanity moving to a common end.

That common end was Washoe.[1] The name was on every tongue. It dominated every mind. All the able-bodied old prospectors who had come round the Horn in the old days, who had followed the stampedes to Kern River, the Fraser, and Told Bluff, were now headed as by one impulse for the silver diggings at the foot of Mt. Davidson. Such rich grounds never had been seen before. All one had to do was to pan the outcroppings and grow rich in a few weeks. Hurrah for Washoe! Hip hip for the land of golden dreams! Washoe or bust!

A canvas-covered emigrant wagon drawn by a pair of emaciated horses moved slowly toward the hills. The driver was a bullet-headed young fellow with sullen, close-set eyes. These were a peculiar grayish-yellow, and the pupils were very small. He was unshaven, poorly dressed, and far from clean. The hardship of a long overland trip had undermined his self-respect and worn away the thin veneer of the man's civility.

At the crest of the first rise he turned in his seat

[1]Nevada was commonly known as Washoe until its admission as a territory under the Spanish name.—W. M. R.

and looked back toward the town. "Good-bye, Hangtown,"[1] he shouted with an oath, shaking his ragged whip.

The skeleton horses crept up the road toward the mountains. Presently evidence of the stampede to Washoe began to manifest itself. The prairie schooner passed a broken-down stage, a smashed wheel, a splintered wagon tongue snapped in the middle. An empty whisky barrel advertised one of the chief staples of trade. A dead burro lay half buried in the mire.

The road had been a good one once. Perhaps it would be hard and firm again after the slush from the rains had dried. Just now it was one to try the patience of man and beast. There were stretches where even the pack mules bogged down while Mexican drivers beat and hauled at them to an accompaniment of excited curses in their native tongue.

A stage from Virginia City swung down the grade, "Pony" King on the box holding the lines, his long whip crackling out snakelike toward the leaders. The stage was not a handsome Concord, the pride of every employee of the company, but one of the mud-wagons used as a substitute when the roads were bad. A pack train of fifteen animals overtook the covered wagon. These carried nothing but liquors—whisky, gin, lager beer, brandy, some pipes of California

[1]In the early days Placerville was often called Hangtown.

wine, and a few baskets of champagne. Foot travellers, carrying outfits on their backs, ploughed wearily forward. Nothing but the wonders of the Comstock Lode could have kept their tired legs moving through the mud.

At every gulch there was a bar, the fixtures improvised from a couple of dry-goods boxes and a canvas top. Restaurants announced themselves every few miles, as well as hotels, which had all necessary accommodations for tired stampeders except food, beds, and bedding.

Later in the day the prairie schooner came into a region where patches of snow began to appear in the hill crotches above. The grade was stiffer and the poor horses made sorry progress. A dozen times they gave up, exhausted. The driver beat them furiously with his whip and flung raucous curses at them. From the wagon a big-eyed child and a wan-faced woman dismounted to lighten the load. Once the woman timidly murmured a protest at her husband's brutality. Savagely he turned on her, snarling his rage explosively.

She shrank back, afraid that he was going to use the whip on her. "Don't, Rob," she begged, face white as the snow in the bank beside the road.

A burro train swung round the bend, and the man flung away from her and lashed the horses instead.

They camped that night at the mouth of a cañon and were on the road at daybreak next morning. The travellers were well into the mountains now. The spring rains had been heavy and had loosened the snow on the slopes. Landslides were frequent and the air was filled with the thunder of avalanches. The trail itself was treacherous. It was honeycombed with chuck holes where the mules of pack outfits had broken through and wallowed in the mud.

The American River plunged down a cañon beside the road. A growth of heavy pines bordered the trail.

When the gaunt team dragged into the clearing at Strawberry Flat hundreds of men and scores of teams were camped there for the night. The animals were tied to the tongues and sides of the wagons and fed from long feed-boxes. They were protected from the cold by heavy canvases lined with blanket stuff. The men who handled the jerkline and the blacksnake curled up under the wagons. Soon they were fast asleep, oblivious to the soft snow that drifted in and wrapped them about.

The driver of the prairie schooner fed and watered the horses while his wife made supper. She found dry wood for kindling in the wagon, and the little girl, who was all thin arms and legs and wild flying hair, gleefully cleared away snow from the spot selected. Soon a fire was roaring and little Victoria

was sniffing the savoury odour of a jackrabbit stew.

She hopped up and down, first on one foot, then on the other.

"Goody, goody. Le's hurry up 'n eat, Sister Mollie," she shouted, waving a spoon excitedly.

After supper Robert Dodson disappeared into the nearest grogshop, and his wife retired to the wagon and nursed a six-weeks-old baby. Victoria washed the dishes, played around the fire, and after a time came hop-skipping through the snowflakes to their canvas-covered home.

"Sister Mollie," announced the child, climbing nimbly up from the tongue, "when I'm big I'm gonna marry a prince, 'n he won't *ever* get drunk 'n beat me like Rob does you."

"Sh-h-h! You mustn't say such things, Vicky," the older sister admonished.

"'N I'm gonna have shoes without holes in 'em 'n a dress not all patchy, with gold spangles 'most all over it. 'N he'll have a silver chariot 'n great big white horses with long tails—not jus' plugs like ours."

Mollie sighed and caught the baby in her arms tighter, so that for a moment the infant stirred restlessly in its sleep. She, too, had once known dreams of the fairy prince who was to come riding gallantly into her life and to carry her irresistibly into the Land of Romance.

From the tent barroom where her husband had gone came the words of a drunken chorus:

"Exciting times all round the town,
Glory, Glory to Washoe,
Stocks are up and stocks are down,
Glory, Glory to Washoe.
Washoe! Washoe!
Bound for the land of Washoe,
And I own three feet
In the 'Old Dead Beat,'
And I'm bound for the land of Washoe."

Mollie recognized the voice of her husband and then his tipsy laugh. Her slight body shivered underneath the thin shawl she was wearing.

CHAPTER III

THE NIGHT RIDE

HUGH McCLINTOCK drew his horse to a walk and skirted the base of a hill. He patted the shiny neck of the bay affectionately. The boy loved the mounts he rode. His life depended on their stamina and speed, and they had never failed him.

"Good old Nevada Jim," he whispered. "We got a long trail before us through these red devils, but I reckon we're good for it, me 'n you."

He was swinging well to the south of the Silver Mountains, riding through country covered with brush. He had been travelling at a rapid pace as he wound in and out among the sage and greasewood. Now he had reached the hills that marked the limit of the range. His intention was to go by way of Alkali Flat, circle Walker Lake, and cross the Walker River range. This plan was subject to change, for at any minute he might run into the Piutes. On the other hand, which was more likely, he might reach Carson without having had a glimpse of them.

Boy though he was, he knew Indians. His father

was one of the earliest pioneers in Eagle Valley. Hugh's first recollection was of the trip from Salt Lake through the desert. He recalled that a cow had worked side by side in the wagon with an ox. The first plough that had broken a furrow in Nevada had been made by his father from discarded wagon tires picked up on the overland road to California. He remembered the days when Captain Jim in beads and buckskin and his breech-clothed tribe had hung around the settlers in pretended friendship. Tame coyotes instead of dogs had followed them. There hung in his mind the memory of a morning when he had gone to the stab e to find the horses run off and the cows stuck full of arrows.

One adventure he would never forget. His mother had wakened h m at midnight and dressed him hurriedly. He and his younger brother had been packed in apple boxes slung on the opposite sides of a mule. Rifle in hand, his father had walked beside a second mule upon which Hugh's mother rode. So they had crossed the Sierras from Mormon Station into California, driven from home by the news that the Indians were raiding the valleys. In his young life he could recall a hundred such memories of the dangers and hardships of pioneering.

While he was still in the hills the brilliant reds and crimsons of sunset gave way to the soft violet of dusk, which in turn melted into the deep purple of falling night. Sometimes, as he wound forward in the

chaparral, he heard the faint rustling of wild shy creatures scurrying to safety.

The stars had long been out before he reached Alkali Flat. He was far from any road, but the unerring instinct of the frontiersman took him, with many twists and turns, in the direction he had chosen. Not long after midnight he struck Walker Lake. He followed the shore line around the southern point. On a little peninsula he unsaddled, picketed Nevada Jim, and slept for nearly two hours.

Darkness was still heavy over the land when he saddled and retied the mail sacks. He crossed Cat Creek, turned northwest, and began the hill trek into the Walker River Range.

Light began to filter into a sky that grew less opaque. The hills took vague outlines. A meadow lark's piping heralded the advent of the young day.

He put Nevada Jim at the saddle of a hill and reached the brow that formed part of the lip of a small saucer-shaped valley beyond. A score of morning camp fires shone like glowworms in the misty hollow. By chance he had stumbled on a party of Piutes who had probably raided a ranch and come down here to revel undisturbed. Very likely it was the same bunch that had waylaid and shot Tim. There rose to the express rider the pungent smell of burning meat, and he guessed that the Indians were indulging in their favourite feast of roasted horseflesh.

McClintock made to turn back, but as he did so a slim breech-clothed figure shot up from the sage almost at his stirrup. The rider, silhouetted against the skyline, was a mark hardly to be missed at such close range even by a Piute with a trade gun. Hugh dragged Nevada Jim round with fore feet in air, drove home his spurs, and charged straight at the brave.

A red-hot stab seared McClintock's side. A moment, and he felt the shock of impact. The sentry was flung headlong before the weight of the horse, which staggered over the naked body, trod it under, and went plunging down the hill.

Hugh heard guttural shouts of alarm from the valley. Presently, riding along the arroyo below, he saw horsemen urging their mounts over the brow of the hill. A shout of triumph told him that he had been seen by his pursuers.

As the long strides of the horse carried him down the arroyo, the boy's brain functioned to meet the emergency. He might turn to the right, circle the lake, make for Alkali Flat, and from there across the hills on the long stretch for the station. The alternative was to keep going north, strike across the range, and point for Carson. Even in this desperate emergency the morale of the service was the deciding factor. The mail was due at Carson in a few hours. With a pressure of his right knee he guided Nevada Jim up the gulch toward a mountain pass he knew above.

If his horse had been fresh McClintock would have had small fear of the result. The Indians had no such ponies as the one he was astride. Their stock was inferior, just as their rifles were. Moreover, at their best they were wretched marksmen. But all the natural advantages of the white man were neutralized. Nevada Jim was far from fresh. Any rifle was better than none, and the pony express rider had to depend on a revolver, good for fast-short-range work but useless now. He was one against many, and already he could feel a wet splash on his shirt when he pressed his hand to his side. How bad the wound was he did not know, but it was certain that the long hard ride before him would not add to his strength.

A boy of his age, trained in any other school except the hard outdoor one of the frontier, might have been forgiven for getting panicky under the circumstances. But Hugh wasted no nerve force in fear surges or in self-pity. He had a job to do. He must do it. That was the simple A B C of his reasoning. Quite coolly he set his mind to work on the problem of *how* it was to be done, given the conditions that confronted him. One trouble was that he did not know those conditions. How long could Nevada Jim, after the hard hours of travel that lay between him and the station, keep going at the pace required? Was he himself likely to collapse suddenly from loss of blood?

His best chance, he decided, lay in the speed of the bay. As soon as he had crossed the range—if he ever got across—he would try to run the Indian ponies off their legs. If they found they could not catch him, the Piutes would give up the chase after a few miles.

The boy looked back. The Indians had swept out of the arroyo and were following him up the gulch. A dozen of them were bunched, with three or four trailing behind. But well in front of the group and going strong was a young brave mounted on a buckskin. At every stride his horse lengthened the distance between him and his companions.

"Big Chief Heap-in-a-Hurry aims to collect me," the boy told himself aloud. "Me, I got different notions. Get a hustle on you, Jim. This is one race where I don't aim to throw down on myself."

The bay answered the call gallantly. With every ounce of bone and muscle Nevada Jim flung forward at the steep trail. The horse gave all it had to give, breathing heavily as it ploughed up the divide.

McClintock had changed his plans. The young Piute on the buckskin was a factor he could not ignore. It would never do to drop down from the hills with this enemy at his heels. The fresher mount would close in on the bay and the Indian would pick Hugh off at his leisure. It would be better to risk all on a bolder, more decisive stroke.

With voice and knee and the gentle caress of

hand he urged Nevada Jim to his best. "I know, old-timer, it's breakin' yore heart," he pleaded. "But I got to ask it of you—just for a mile or two more, Jim—till we get to the pass; then that'll be all, if our luck stands up."

Hugh felt his side again and was alarmed at the sogginess of the flannel shirt. The pain of the wound was insistent, but he had no time to worry about that. What troubled him was the loss of blood. He might fall out of the saddle from sheer weakness before he reached safety.

He looked back and faintly grinned. The Indians were beginning to string out, and the gap between the buckskin and the other horses had widened. This was exactly what he wanted.

"Come on, you Buckskin," he shouted softly down the wind. "Don't you stick around with them broomtails."

Nevada Jim's lungs were pumping hard, but the clean long legs of the horse still reached with long strides for the rising ground, the muscular shoulders moved smoothly and automatically.

The head of the divide was close now, scarcely a quarter of a mile in front of the fugitives. Hugh looked back as he galloped up into the pass. The buckskin was far in advance of the other pursuers.

The pass was short and narrow. At the very summit a huge boulder outcropped from the ridge. McClintock swung his labouring horse back of this,

and at the same instant leaped to the ground. Swiftly he unclinched and drew the bay close to the flat face of the great rock. For the first time since the wild race had begun he took from its scabbard the navy revolver he carried.

He had not long to wait. There came the sound of a hoof striking the hard quartz of the ridge, then the thud of galloping feet. The express rider tensed his muscles. He was like a coiled spring as he crouched back of the boulder, a menace to life as deadly as a rattlesnake about to strike.

Smoothly he slid round the edge of the rock. The Piute, taken by surprise, jerked the buckskin sideways and tried to raise his rifle. Lightning flashed from McClintock's sixshooter—once, twice. He dived forward and caught the bridle just as the redskin tumbled from the horse. The rifle clattered to the ground.

Hugh took one look at the Indian. It was enough. He would never steal another horse from the whites. The buckskin, frightened, tried to jerk away. Its new owner spoke gently, soothingly. He coaxed the startled animal to the rock and transferred the saddle from the back of Nevada Jim.

Already he could hear approaching horses. As rapidly as possible he cinched and swung astride. Yet an instant, and he was galloping down the western slope.

As he looked back, McClintock saw an Indian's

head and the upper part of his body rising and falling with the stride of a horse. He was the first of the pursuers coming up into the pass. There was a shout and the sound of a shot. A bullet struck a spurt of sand from the ground some yards ahead of the express rider. Other shots came, a scattering volley of them. Hugh had thrust his smoking revolver back into the scabbard. He did not attempt to draw it again. The primary business of the moment was to get the buckskin into its stride and widen the distance between him and his enemies.

Soon he was out of range. Bullets were still falling, but they struck the dust behind him. The buckskin was fast and willing. Nevada Jim, like many of the company horses, had a cross of Morgan blood. This horse was a mustang, but it had unusual speed and power. Hugh wondered whether the ranchman who had owned it had been killed when his place was raided.

The pursuit continued for several miles, but the Indians fell always farther to the rear. At last they dropped out. At least Hugh saw them no more.

It was time. McClintock was faint and dizzy. He could barely stick to the saddle by clinging with both hands to the pommel. His wound, irritated by the constant motion, hurt a great deal. The fever mounted in his blood.

The amber dawn gave place to clear day. The sun climbed high in the heavens. It was noon when the

buckskin picked its way through the East Walker River to the west bank.

The boy could go no farther. He slid down, tied the horse, and staggered to the water. An odd light-headed feeling lifted him from the ground, it seemed. He floated, imponderable, on waves of air resonant with music. Then he passed out of all sensation whatever into unconsciousness.

He came to life again placidly and without energy. When he roused himself to think about it his body was singularly inert. It was almost as though it were a thing apart from himself, did not belong to him at all. He tried heavily with his hand to brush away the cobwebs from his mind. Then slowly he remembered what had taken place.

The buckskin was still standing patiently beside the willow to which he had tied it. The sun was beginning to slant from the west.

Slowly he undressed himself in part, washed the wound with clean water, and tied it up with a bandage torn from his clothing. His fever was high, and he bathed his face in the cold water fresh from the mountain snows.

He was in no condition to travel, but he knew he would have to stick to the saddle till he reached a settlement. Even if the Indians had given up the chase, he could not lie here without food, shelter, or attention to his wound. When he rose to drag himself to the horse it took all his grit to set his teeth on

the pain that went through him like a knife thrust. He could not hold his body erect without agony.

Somehow he reached the buckskin and pulled himself to the saddle. He held the pony to a walk, because this jolted his side less than any other gait. His mind refused to consider the long hours he must spend on the rack of torture. Every moment was sufficient to itself. He would set landmarks for himself. That scrub cottonwood by the river must be passed. When that had been reached a bunch of greasewood ahead became his goal. So, mile by mile, in a growing delirium, he kept going till he was far up in the Pine Nut Range.

He lost count of time and of distance. He forgot where he was travelling or why. He remembered only Indians, and the fear he had resolutely repressed —which no doubt had been uppermost all the time in the boy's subconscious mind—expressed itself in the babbling of his delirious talk.

"They're roostin' up there in the hills somewheres. Sure are. Want my topknot for to decorate their tepees. Hump yoreself, you Nevada Jim. I feel right spindlin', an' I want Mother to fix me up some sage tea. . . . They're after me full jump. See 'em come lickety split. Aimin' to scalp me, all on account that I didn't stop to say 'Howdy.'" His laughter jangled in the empty desert, fear for the moment forgotten. "We ce'tainly lit a-runnin', me an' you, Jim, when we jumped up

them Piutes. Clumb for the tall timber, didn't we, *amigo viego?* . . . Never did see mountains dance before. S'lute yore pardners. Grand right an' left. Alemane . . . Here the devils come, hell for leather. Better not crawl our humps, eh, Jim? We'll sure show 'em what for."

It was the buckskin that saved him, that and the terror which had become an obsession. He clung to the saddle desperately, long after he no longer knew the reason for it, long after he had ceased to guide his mount. Just before nightfall the horse took him to a Mormon ranch.

A comfortable-looking matron, feeding her chickens, looked up to see the horse and its load motionless before her.

"Lands sake!" she ejaculated, amazed; then raised her voice in a shout to her husband. "Father, come here. Buckskin has come home, and——"

She broke off to run to McClintock's aid. He had slid from the saddle to the ground.

"The poor boy," she cried. "He's all shot up. He's dead, I guess. It's them Piutes. Help me get him into the house, Father."

With a ghost of a smile the wounded boy reassured her.

CHAPTER IV

SCOT McCLINTOCK INTRODUCES HIMSELF

MARK TWAIN tells us that in the early Nevada days it gave a man no permanent satisfaction to shoot an enemy through both lungs, because the dry air was so exhilarating that the wounded foe was soon as good as new. Hugh McClintock was an illustration of this. He reached the Mormon settlement a white-faced rag of humanity. But he had lived hard and clean. The wind and the sun and able-bodied forbears had given him a constitution tough as hammered brass. When his brother Scot drove from Virginia City to see him, having heard the news that Hugh was wounded to death, he found the boy wrapped in a blanket and sitting in the sunshine at the corner of the ranch house. This was just a week after the end of the young brother's wild ride.

"'Lo, Hugh! How are cases?" asked Scot, his gay smile beaming down at the boy.

"Fine as silk, Scot. I got an appetite like a bear. Sorry you had to come so far."

"I hooked up soon as I heard about it, old f'ler.

Now I've seen you I feel a lot better. The way I heard it you were ready to cash your chips."

Scot's arm was round the lad's shoulder. The half-caress, the light in the fine eyes, the warmth of the voice, all told of the strong affection the older brother had for the younger. Hugh repaid this love with interest. In his eyes Scot was an Admirable Crichton, the most wonderful man he had ever been privileged to know. He trod the earth a king among his race—and the king could do no wrong.

No two sons of the same father and mother could have been more unlike than these. The last-born was counted steady as an eight-day clock, reliable as tested steel. The other walked wild and forbidden paths. Yet to call them unlike is to tell a half-truth. They had in common courage, a certain cleanness of fibre, and an engaging gaiety. Scot McClintock was nearly ten years older than Hugh, but there was a remarkable physical resemblance between them. Each had inherited from a Scotch father eyes of the same colour, a square-cut chin, and a strong Roman nose. The head of each was crowned with curls of russet gold.

The shoulders of Scot were broader, his figure less stringy. He was of splendid physique, tall, compact, powerful. Bearing himself with manly grace, he radiated vitality. His chin told the truth. He was indomitably resolute, a born leader. Vanity was his weakness. The spectacular appealed. It had

been said of him that he would rather break down a door than wait for a key. The self-esteem of the man expressed itself in clothes. These he wore always for effect, with the knowledge that his fine figure would win him envy and admiration, even though he affected the dandy. In his frock coat of doeskin with its flaring skirt and broad lapels, his fancy vest cut wide to show a frilled shirt and blue satin necktie, his pegtop trousers, his immaculately varnished boots, and his flat-crowned silk derby, he was out of question the Beau Brummel of Washoe. Another might have been laughed at for this punctilious devotion to dress, but even in Virginia City nobody was hardy enough to poke fun at Scot McClintock.

Many smiled with him, for this blue-eyed gambler had a thousand friends. It was in his horoscope to fight or share his last dollar with you gladly. He did not care which. He could be brave, reckless, generous, sociable, or witty. But nobody could ever say that he was mean spirited.

"I'm going to take you back with me as soon as you can travel, Hugh," he said.

"That'll be to-morrow mo'ning."

"Sure you can stand the jolting yet?"

"Sure. Ask Mother Jessup here."

The rancher's wife had come out from the house and been introduced to Scot. Now she smiled comfortably at her patient. "He's doing fine."

"He would, with you looking after him, Madam," Scot answered gallantly.

"It's a God's mercy he stuck on all those miles, wounded the way he was. I don't see how he ever did," Mrs. Jessup said.

"I reckon he clamped his teeth on the job. Hugh's right obstinate when he gets set," the older brother said with affectionate pride.

"Runs in the family," Hugh cut back, grinning.

"Maybe so. Well, tell me all about it, boy. Where did you jump the Piutes? And how did you make your getaway?"

"Not much to tell," the younger brother replied, and gave a skeleton outline of the story.

They started on their journey next morning, made a short day of it on account of Hugh's wound, and put up at Carson for the night.

On what had been known as Eagle Ranch, in the valley of the same name, the town of Carson had been built. During the previous decade both Eagle and Carson valleys had served as a refuge for those who ran off stolen stock from San Francisco and other California points. In these hidden parks the outlaws had been accustomed to rest and feed the herds before making the desert trip by obscure routes to Salt Lake. But those days were past. Carson now had two thousand inhabitants, a boom in town lots, and a civic consciousness. It had become respectable, though guns still flashed frequently. Already

it was laying political wires to become the capital of Nevada, the "battle-born" state.

Through Carson supplies came by way of Mormon Station for the diggings at Virginia, along a road which wound around the base of the hills. As Scot drove in, the air was musical with chimes. Some of these came soft and mellow from a great distance. Each mule of the freight outfits had a circlet of bells suspended in a steel bow above its collar. They made music as they moved.

At the hay corral into which McClintock drove, scores of outfits were gathered, most of them freighters to or from the diggings. A dozen others could be heard jingling in, from one direction or the other. The winter had been a severe one, and hundreds of cattle in the adjacent valleys had died for lack of feed. Hay was scarce. There was a very strong demand for it to feed the freight outfits. Just now the price was three hundred dollars a ton. Ranchers found it far more profitable to let their cattle rustle on bunch grass and take a chance of roughing through than to feed hay worth such a price. Wherefore all the native hay went to the stock hauling supplies.

Scot hailed Baldy Green, a well-known stage driver. "How about places up on the stage for me and Hugh to-morrow, old-timer?"

Baldy rubbed the top of his shiny head and grinned at him. "Full up. Like to ditch a couple of

my passengers for you if I could—a jewellery peddler and a sky pilot—but I don't reckon I can, Scot."

The eyes of the older McClintock sparkled. "Show 'em to me, Baldy."

Three minutes later the Beau Brummel of Virginia City might have been seen in earnest conversation with a clergyman who hailed from Buffalo, New York. He was telling the story of the Indian attack upon his brother and making certain deductions from it. His manner of grave deference was perfect.

"But bless my soul, do you really think the redskins are likely to attack the stage to-morrow?" asked the startled missionary.

"Can't tell, sir. They were certainly heading this way when last seen. Big chance of it, I'd say. I'm a sinner—a professional gambler. What does it matter about me? But you—the only minister of the Gospel in a hundred miles—you can't be spared. The harvest is ripe for the reaper. Why not wait here a day or two and make sure the Piutes are not around?"

The missionary was frankly frightened, but he had in him the stuff of heroes. His lower lip became a thin straight line of resolution. No professional gambler should put his courage to shame. If he rode through the valley of the shadow he had a promise from Holy Writ to comfort him.

"I'll go if the stage goes," he said stoutly.

Scot McClintock knew when he was beaten temporarily. But he was not the man to give up a point upon which he had set his heart. He looked up a friend of his, the mayor of the town, drew him aside, and whispered persuasively in his ear.

The fat little man with whom he talked exploded a protest. "But doggone it, Scot, if the Gospel shark accepts, won't I have to go to his meetin'?"

"Maybe so. What of it? Be a good scout, Adams. I want that boy of mine to get up to Virginia to-morrow so that I can make him comfortable."

The mayor grinned. "Never saw your beat for gettin' your own way. All right. I'll rustle up some of the women and ask him."

Scot dropped into the What Cheer House and glanced around. The jewellery salesman was sitting in a corner by himself. McClintock introduced himself and invited the stranger to a rum cocktail or a whisky sling. In five minutes he knew all about the peddler's business and how much he hoped to make from the sale of his stock at Virginia.

"But why not sell it here in Carson? The town's booming. Lots of money here. More women. Up in Virginia they can't think anything except mines," Scot suggested.

"My friendt, I make more at Virginia."

"Well, you know your business better than I do. Hope we get through without trouble."

"Trouble? Vat kind of trouble?"

"Injuns on warpath. They shot up my brother. I'm taking him up with me to a doctor. From the way the Piutes were heading I rather expect an attack on the stage to-morrow."

The peddler rose to the bait, excitedly, with shrill voice. "And I haf paid my fare to Virginia. It's an outrage. I vill demand a refund. I vill sue the company. I vill nodt travel in onsavety. You are right, my friendt. I sell my stock right here in Carson if I get a refund."

"I would," agreed McClintock sympathetically, "I know Baldy Green. Let's see if he'll stand for the refund."

The stage driver played up to his friend with a serious face. It was not customary to make refunds. He had a kind of hunch the stage would get through without being attacked. But if the gentleman wanted to stay at Carson and if McClintock would guarantee him against loss to the company through an empty seat, probably it could be arranged. Incidentally, he mentioned that he had just heard from the clergyman cancelling his passage. He had been urged by a deputation of Carson citizens to stay in town over Sunday and preach on the plaza. This call, he felt, could not be ignored.

Baldy called Scot back as he was leaving. The stage driver's face was one wrinkled grin. "You

ce'tainly take the cake, old alkali. I got to give it to you. Afraid the stage will be attacked, are you? Dad gum yore hide, you know Injuns won't dare come up here on the peck."

"I'd hate to have the jewellery gentleman take any chances," Scot explained.

"And preachin' on the plaza. Don't you know there's hawss racin here every Sunday?" cackled Baldy.

"Competition is the life of trade. The ladies can meet an' pray for their wicked husbands. They need it, don't they?"

"Sure do. Well, I got no kick comin'. I won't be here Sunday."

Neither was Scot. He and his brother travelled Virginiaward in the morning. The "mud-wagon" had been left at Carson. They travelled in a beautiful painted Concord stage behind six high-stepping chestnuts decked with ivory rings, silver tassels, and expensive harness.

Baldy drove superbly. He and his kind were knights of the road. The wranglers and attendants were deferential to them, the public viewed them admiringly as celebrities. Baldy drew on his gauntlets slowly, mounted to the box, and took the ribbons from the hand of a hostler. There was a swift tightening of the reins, a sweeping crack of the whip. The leaders came round on the run, the swings at a gallop, and the wheelers at a trot.

The ride to Virginia was one worth taking. The road wound round curves, dropped into draws, swept along dugways beneath which were deep precipices. When he hit the curves Baldy gave the wheels play. Occasionally one of the back ones hung precariously over space. A minute later the stage perhaps had struck a level and the driver was riding the brakes while the horses dashed wildly forward. Ten miles an hour, up hill and down, over the precipitous mountain road, the chestnuts travelled wildly, every foot of the way guided by the man on the box who handled them coolly and expertly. Meanwhile, Baldy discussed casually with Scot McClintock the news of the day. With his whip he pointed to a bad turn.

"Hank Monk went over the grade yesterday—coach, hawsses, and passengers."

"Much damage?"

"Nope—none a-tall. Nary a beast skinned. Paint on coach hardly scratched. Busted one tenderfoot's laig. That's all. Mighty lucky spill. Hank always did fall on his feet. Been me I'd prob'ly a-hurted one of the animals."

"Lucky for all parties except the tenderfoot," agreed Scot.

"Yep. Couldn't a-been better. G'lang!"

The long whip snaked out with a crack like the sound of an exploding gun. The coach leaped forward, swaying like a cradle set on wheels. They

were drawing close to Virginia now, and the whole desert was staked like the sole of a giant shoe. American Flat fell away to the rear. The chestnuts raced up Gold Hill and the Ophir Grade, across the divide, and down into Virginia City, which was perched on the lower slope of Mt. Davidson.

The town was an uncouth and windswept camp, but it represented uncounted hopes and amazing energy. In this mass of porphyry lay the fabulously rich Comstock Lode, from which in a single generation nearly a billion dollars' worth of ore was to be taken.

The Concord dropped down into B Street, the horses covering the home stretch at a gallop. Baldy brought the coach along the rough street at a dead run, sweeping it skillfully around a train of wood-packed burros. He stopped exactly in front of the company's office, twined the reins around the brake bar, and smiled at Scot.

"Yore friend the peddler will feel sold when he hears you wasn't scalped."

"The scenery flew past so fast I couldn't tell whether it was punctuated with Piutes or not," said Scot genially, as he swung down to help Hugh from inside.

The younger McClintock stepped out stiffly.

"Hope I didn't mix yore inside geography too much," Baldy asked him.

"I'm all right. The docs say the inside of a stage-

coach is first rate for the inside of a man," Hugh answered.

"Tha's right, too—for a well man; but they don't say it's a sure cure for one the Injuns have been playin' with, do they? Well, so long, young fellow. Don't you let that rip-snortin' brother o' yours c'rupt you none."

CHAPTER V

SCOT PASSES THE HAT

THROUGH the throngs that crowded, not only the dilapidated sidewalks, but also the street itself, Scot guided his brother deftly toward the hotel. The whole appearance of the place was still higgledy-piggledy. Men lived in tents, in dugouts, in prospect holes, in shacks built of dry-goods boxes, canvas sacks, and brush. They cooked and ate as best they could, while they went about their business of prospecting or buying and selling "feet"[1] in what by courtesy were called mines.

"We'll cut across this lot," the gambler suggested.

A mud-stained wagon with a dirty canvas top had been unhitched close to the street. Two bony and dejected horses were tied to the wheels eating some brush that they were trying to persuade themselves was hay.

Hugh commented on the broomtails. "So thin they won't throw a shadow."

A moment later he was sorry, for as they rounded

[1]In Virginia City mining interests were then sold by feet, and not by shares.—W. M. R.

the wagon he saw a woman and child crouched over a camp fire. They were cooking a stew. A man sat on the wagon tongue smoking. He looked at the passing men out of sullen, clouded eyes.

A voice from the sidewalk drifted to the brothers. "Trouble, looks like. Sam Dutch has got Red Mike backed up against the bar of the Mile High, and he's tryin' to devil him into drawing a six-shooter."

On the heels of the words there came the sound of a shot, followed by a second. A swift trampling of many feet, and the side door of the Mile High burst open. Men poured out of it as seeds are squirted from a pressed lemon. They dived in every direction to escape. After them came a single man, bareheaded, a revolver in his hand. He looked wildly round, then fled to the shelter of the wagon for safety. A huge fellow, bellowing like a bull, tore out of the saloon in pursuit.

An ironclad rule of the old fighting West is that every quarrel is a private one. No outsider has any right to interfere. Under ordinary conditions, the first impulse of the McClintocks would have been to dive for cover. The West considers it no reflection on a man's courage for him to sing small when guns are out to settle a difference of opinion which is no concern of his.

The McClintocks, as though moved by the same spring, wheeled in their tracks and ran back to the wagon. The man on the tongue was disappearing

into the bed through the opening in the canvas. But the woman and the little girl, terror-stricken, stood spellbound beside the fire. Pursued and pursuer were charging straight toward them. A bullet struck with a metallic clang the iron pot in the live coals. The child screamed.

Roughly the woman and the little girl went down at the same instant, flung to the ground by the impact of flying bodies. They heard more shots, but they knew nothing of what was going on. For the McClintock brothers were crouched above them, shielding them from the danger of wild bullets. They did not see the red-headed man stumble and pitch forward, nor did they see the big ruffian at his heels fling shot after shot into his prostrate form.

Hugh released his weight from the child, and lifted her to her feet in such a way that her face was turned from the tragedy.

"Run right along into the wagon where yore dad is, li'l girl, and don't turn yore head," he said, and his voice was very gentle.

She moved forward, whimpering as she went, and climbed to the wagon tongue. But, just as she was about to vanish inside, curiosity or some other impulse swung round her black and shaggy little head. Big dark eyes fastened on Hugh, then moved past him to the awful thing she was to see in her dreams for many a night. A man, red-haired and red-bearded, lay face up on the ground, sightless eyes staring up

at the blue sky. A second man straddled the body with brutal triumph, a big slouchy fellow with coarse tawny hair reaching to his neck, and sandy whiskers tied under his chin. He wore a brown Peruvian hat, a blue army overcoat with a cape, and a woollen shirt. From his bootleg a horn-handled bowie knife projected.

"Wanted to be chief,[1] eh?" the murderer jeered in a heavy overbearing voice. "There'll be only one chief in Virginia while Sam Dutch is here. If any one else wants the job, he'll gets his like Red Mike did." He shuffled away, Spanish spurs jingling, slouching and slow of movement. His gestures were heavy, except when shooting. No bad man in Washoe was quicker on the draw.

A faint trickle of smoke still issued from the barrel of his revolver as he thrust it back into its scabbard, where it could be seen beneath the flapping coat tails. He disappeared into the Mile High and proceeded to down half-a-dozen gin slings at the expense of friends who did not dare withhold this tribute of admiration lest he make one of them number eleven on his list. An hour later, Scot McClintock saw him there, in drunken slumber lying on a billiard table,

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[1]It was a matter of pride among the desperadoes of Nevada in early days to be cock of the walk. Many a "bad man" died with his boots on because he aspired to be "chief" among his fellows. So long as these ruffians killed each other, the community paid little attention to their murders. When good citizens fell victim, a sentiment was created which eventually resulted in the supremacy of law.—W. M. R.

the brute primordial, first among the bad men of the lawless camp because he was its most deadly ruffian. There were those who would have liked to make an end of him as he lay soddenly asleep, but he was so quick and terrible that their fear was greater than the lust to kill.

Scot helped from the ground the woman he had thrown. She looked at him, her breast rising and falling deep, fear still quick in the soft brown eyes. Her cheeks were white as the snow on Mt. Davidson.

"Madam, I'm sorry I was rough," Scot said, and gave her the most gallant bow in Washoe. "But you were in the line of fire. I couldn't take chances."

Emotion shook her. A faint colour crept timidly into her face. She said, in a voice hardly audible: "You saved my life."

"I wouldn't go that far," the man answered, smiling.

Something eager, beautiful, made of the woman's eyes soft stars of night. "I'll never forget—never," she promised,with a strangled sob.

There was a low jangling laugh at her shoulder. "Tha's right. Always a fool if you can find a chance to be one, Moll," a voice sneered.

The light died from the woman's eyes, the colour from her cheeks. She became at once a creature lifeless, without spirit.

Scot turned, voice soft and suave. "Did you find

what you went to look for in the wagon, sir?" he asked, raking the unkempt unclean emigrant with scornful eyes.

A dull flush burned into the man's face. A furtive darting look slid from the yellow-gray eyes. It carried menace, as does sometimes that of a tamed wolf toward its trainer.

"I—I didn't notice where Moll was when I started," he said with sullen reluctance. "An' I reckon tha's *my* business."

"Quite so," agreed the gambler.

He bowed again to the woman in the cheap patched homespun, met the eyes of his brother, and turned to go.

From the wagon came a weak little wail. The McClintocks stood rooted in their tracks. Again the puling cry was raised. With a murmured exclamation the woman excused herself hurriedly and climbed into the covered wagon.

"Have you got a baby there?" asked Scot, a new note in his voice.

The father grunted a sulky "Yes."

"A baby, Hugh. An honest-to-God baby. The first in Virginia City. What do you think about that?"

"Could we see it, do you reckon?" the younger brother asked eagerly.

Scot turned on him reproving eyes. "I'm surprised at you, Hugh. That baby's being—fed—

right now." Suddenly he wheeled on the emigrant. "Boy or girl?"

"Girl!"

"Great. We'll call her Virginia."

"Her name's Susan," the father growled.

"No matter. We'll change it. Last name?"

"Dodson. Her name's goin' to stay right what it is now."

A crowd of men had poured upon the vacant lot to view the scene of the killing. Some were removing the body to an adjacent saloon, others were discussing the affair guardedly from its dramatic and not from its ethical standpoint. There was no question of ethics in an ordinary killing if both combatants had had ample warning. It was the boast of Virginia, just as it was later of Austin, Pioche, Aurora, and the other Nevada camps, that it had "a man for breakfast" each day. This was not the literal truth, but it was too nearly true for comfort. The diggings were infested with wild, lawless criminals driven from more settled communities. They robbed stages, held up citizens, and maintained the rule of the six-gun among communities the great majority of whose residents would much have preferred peace and order.

Scot climbed into the bed of an empty ore wagon and clapped his hands for silence. Only those in his immediate vicinity heard him, wherefore Scot got what he wanted by the simple expedient of firing his revolver into the air.

For a moment there was the threat of a stampede, but not after the discovery that McClintock had fired the gun. Scot was known as a professional gambler, a respectable business man who did not kill wantonly. It was evident that he wanted to make a speech. Anything in reason that Scot McClintock wanted in Virginia City he could have. He was the most popular man in camp.

"Go to it, Scot. Onload heap much oration," someone shouted.

After which there was silence.

"Boys," Scot began simply, "I'm going to tell you something that will please you a lot. We've got a baby in camp, a real, genuine, blown-in-the-bottle guaranteed baby, the first one that ever hit Virginia City. It's a lady baby, and her name's Susan. Now, we've none of us got anything against Susan. It's a good name. But it's not the name for our baby. We're going to name that kid Virginia or know why."

A wild howl of approval lifted into the air. The emotions of Washoe were direct and primitive. This was the sort of thing that made its sure appeal. These men were far from their womenkind and the ties of home. Many of them had slipped into ways that would have shocked their sheltered relatives in older communities. But they were sentimental as schoolgirls. A baby was the symbol of all the

happiness they had left behind when they undertook the lonesome hardships of gold hunting. They cheered and shouted and shook hands with each other in deep delight.

"We're going to give this kid a good send-off, because she's our baby. Virginia is her name and Virginia is her home. I'm going to pass the hat, boys. You, El Dorado Johnnie and Jean Poulette and Six-Fingered Pete and Murphy Davis get your hats off and circulate among these Washoe millionaires and bummers. Dig deep into your jeans, every last one of you. We're going to do the right thing by this little lady the good Lord has sent us. Whoop 'er up now," adjured McClintock.

From every direction men came running to this new form of entertainment. Saloons and gambling houses emptied. The streets began to pack. Still the jingling of coins dropping into hats could be heard. Everybody gave. Scot appointed a committee to count the spoils and another committee to invite the town's brass band down to the reception.

Meanwhile he whispered in Hugh's ear and the boy carried a message to the prairie schooner.

"I want to see Mrs. Dodson," he told that lady's husband.

The dull, unimaginative face of the man was lit with cupidity and suspicion. It surely was not possible that all this money was going to be turned

over to him just because he had a baby. The world couldn't possibly be so full of fools. Yet it looked like it. He called his wife.

She came out to the tent flap with the baby in her arms. All this noise and confusion frightened her a little, but it did not disturb the tousled little girl by her side. It was meat and drink to her. Her eyes snapped with excitement. She had an inkling of what was going on, and she wriggled like a small, pleased puppy.

Hugh took off his hat. "Madam, we'd like to borrow for a little while yore family. We're figurin' on a sort of a parade, and we want the baby in it. We'd like to have you an' the li'l girl go along to see the baby's taken care of proper."

"Goody, goody!" Victoria hopped from one foot to the other as a register of approval.

The woman hesitated. Her glance fluttered timidly to the husband. "I don't know. What do you think, Rob?" Then, in a low voice: "I haven't anything to wear. Perhaps you could take Baby."

The boy interposed hurriedly. "That's not quite the idea, ma'am. The boys are kinda hungry to see a sure-enough mother and baby. It would be a kindness to them if you'd come yoreself. We'll have the stage, an' you can ride beside the driver. O' course we don't aim to be bossy about it, but our hearts are real set on this." He smiled, and Hugh's boyish grin was a winsome argument. It had the

touch of sweet deference women liked. "They're rough looking, ma'am, but none of these miners would hurt you for the world. It's a celebration for the camp's first baby."

"Oh, let's go, Sister Mollie," urged Victoria. "I wantta ride in the pee-rade."

The woman whispered with her husband. He broke out roughly: "Don't be so damned finicky. Your dress is all right."

"We'll come," the young woman told the boy. "In a few minutes we'll be ready. And thank you for wanting us."

Scot McClintock presently arrived himself and escorted the guests of honour to the stage. He assisted the young mother to the seat beside Baldy and passed the baby up to her. The infant was a plump little thing with fat dimpled arms and legs. It crowed up into Scot's face and gurgled happily at him. Vicky was lifted up to the seat next her sister.

As master of ceremonies Scot, in a long red sash, mounted on a beautiful white horse, rode at the head of the procession. The stage came next, followed by Virginia's young and exuberant brass band. After this marched the fire organizations in their red shirts and helmets. Empty ore wagons fell into line and were quickly filled with miners. A mixed crowd of residents on foot brought up the rear.

The contributions already collected had been poured from the hats into a tub. This was tied to the back of the stage, in the place where trunks and packages usually rested. All along A Street and back along B Street men fought to get at the tub with their money. The band played "Old Dan Tucker" and other popular airs, but out of deference to a divided public opinion did not give either "Yankee Doodle" or "Dixie."[1] There were speeches, of course, full of bombast, eloquence, and local patriotism, all of which were vociferously applauded.

It was while the band was playing that the guest of honour began to cry.

"Stop that damn band and give the kid a chance," someone shouted.

A hundred light-hearted sons of mirth took up the word. The band stopped in the middle of a bar, and to her mother's embarrassment Miss Virginia Dodson entertained with a solo.

The marshal of the parade rode back to the coach and smiled up at the young mother.

"Don't mind the boys," he advised. "It's just their way of showing how much they think of our baby. You know, ma'am, this town claims the young lady. We've adopted her, but if you say 'Please' real nice we'll let you bring her up."

[1]The Civil War was being fought at this time, and though Nevada was far from the scene of action, sectional feeling was high. A fairly large minority of those in Virginia City and Carson were Southerners.—W. M. R.

Mollie's bosom warmed within her. A lump rose in her throat and her eyes misted. For years she had been the chattel of Robert Dodson, a creature to be sneered at, derided, and beaten. This splendid-looking hero of romance treated her as though she were a lady. She wondered who he could be. Among all these rough-bearded miners he shone like diamonds in a mud heap. His clothes, manner, speech, the musical intonation of his voice, all set him apart from other men, she thought, even if his figure and face had not marked him for distinction.

A big blond lawyer with a long yellow beard was at the head of the committee appointed to count the money. His name was William M. Stewart. Later he represented Nevada in the United States Senate for many years. At the request of Scot McClintock he made the presentation speech, the baby in his arms at the time. The total amount collected ran over thirty-two hundred dollars.

Robert Dodson had been drinking more or less all day. He had taken the opportunity to celebrate rather steadily during the parade, since, as father of Virginia, he had been offered a nip at many bottles. Now he unwisely presented himself to take charge of the fund raised.

Stewart looked at him carefully, then exchanged glances with Scot.

"Friends," said the future Senator, "I move a committee of three to take charge of Miss Virginia's edu-

cational fund. If this is satisfactory I shall ask the citizens of the camp to name the trustees."

It was so voted. When the time came to name the custodians of the fund the crowd shouted "McClintock" and "Stewart."

The big blond lawyer consulted with Scot. "Mr. McClintock and I are glad to serve as trustees in your behalf, gentlemen," announced Stewart. "With your permission we shall name Robert Dodson, the father of Virginia, as the third member."

In the months that followed, Dodson flew into a rage whenever the trust fund was mentioned. He insinuated to his cronies over the bar that McClintock and Stewart were manipulating the money to their own advantage. The fact was that they refused to let their co-trustee get his fingers on any of it to dissipate.

CHAPTER VI

HUGH SITS IN

FROM every state and many nations the pioneers of California came, young, ardent, hopeful, strong. Round the Horn in clipper ships, across the fever-swept Isthmus, by way of the long Overland Trail, they poured into the Golden West. They laughed at hardship. They wrote songs of defiance to bad luck and sang them while they worked and starved and died. Self-contained and confident, they gutted mountains, made deserts leafy green, built cities that were the marvel of their generation. To these sunset shores came the pick of the world's adventurous youth.

Nevada absorbed the best and the worst of California's seasoned veterans. Gay, reckless, debonair, the gold-seekers went their turbulent way. Every man was a law to himself, carried in his holster the redress for wrongs. The wildest excesses prevailed. The most brutal crimes went unpunished. For years there was no night at Virginia, at Austin, or at Eureka. The flare from dance halls, hurdy-gurdys, and gambling houses flung splashes of light on masses

of roughly dressed men engaged in continual revelry.

But it would be unjust to condemn Washoe because it did not measure up to the standards of Philadelphia. At its worst no good woman was ever more revered than here, no child's innocence more zealously guarded. And, as it proved, the strength of the bad man lacked the endurance of the one who was good. Law and order came to Nevada, brought by stalwarts who took their lives in their hands to punish desperadoes.

The dominance of law came slowly, because Washoe was under the jurisdiction of Utah, so far away across the desert that its authority was only a shadow. Until this handicap was taken away, no real civil authority was possible.

The earliest mining at Virginia was done from the grass roots, which fact accounts largely for the character of its population. Six-Mile Cañon heads on the north side of Mt. Davidson, Gold Cañon about a mile distant on its south slope. Placer miners, working among the decomposed rock and gravel of the ravines, moved up toward the mother lode without knowing it. The clay in which they dug was so tough it had to be "puddled" in water with shovels.

But the formation of the strata had convinced the astute that the Washoe diggings were a quartz proposition. The rocker and the long tom had had their day. Into the Ophir and the Gould & Curry,

steam hoists had been put. The shafts were going deeper every hour. Much litigation developed, due in part to defective location work and disputes as to veins. This brought to the territory the ablest bar on the Pacific Coast. Among the newspaper reporters who worked a few months later on the *Territorial Enterprise* was Mark Twain. He was one of a dozen brilliant writers who later were known from coast to coast, all of whom were associated with the Goodwins on this paper.

No other such mining camp ever existed. Side by side with lawlessness and the roughest makeshifts there existed a high civilization which was satisfied with nothing less than the best. In the days to come, after the town had found its feet, McCullough, Booth, Barrett, and Modjeska played at Piper's Opera House within a stone's throw of the raucous uproar of the hurdy-gurdy houses. One lucky miner expressed himself in a mansion equipped with door stops of gold and door knobs of silver; another lifted his eyes to the stars and wrote his soul out with fire-tipped pen.

In this heterogeneous society there was at first no class consciousness. The professional gambler had a special standing. He was accepted as necessary to the community, much as a doctor or a merchant was. He set the standard of dress and of manners. If he was a "square sport" he played a fair game. The most distinguished men in the camp were glad

to sit down at poker with such a gambler as Scot McClintock.

So long as the road from California was open Virginia City lived on the best that could be imported. But during the heavy winter just ending the trail had been closed for months. Food was dangerously short. The supply of potatoes and onions, the staple vegetables, had become completely exhausted. There was very little fresh meat, though jackrabbits were fortunately plentiful. To make conditions worse, soft heavy spring snows blocked the passes and made transportation impossible. At Placerville and at Strawberry Flat great trains of supplies waited for the opening of the trail.

On a sunny wind-swept afternoon Scot McClintock made his way from the International Hotel to the Crystal Palace, where he dealt faro to a high-priced clientele. He was pleasantly at peace with the world. If he carried a derringer in his pocket it was as a concession to the custom of a country where every man went armed. His progress along B Street and through the Crystal Palace to his seat was in the nature of a reception. For everybody knew Scot and wanted to claim acquaintance with him.

He nodded to the players, slid into his chair, and began to deal. His face took on the gambler's mask of impassivity. This mask did not lift when a heavy-set huge man slouched into the Crystal Palace and to the corner where McClintock presided.

Someone hastily moved aside to give the newcomer a place. Nobody in Virginia City disputed any question of precedence with Sam Dutch.

The desperado had been drinking. It was apparent to all that he was in an ugly humour. Gradually, inconspicuously, the players at that end of the hall cashed in their chips and departed from the immediate vicinity. Scot continued to deal with a wooden face, but behind his expressionless eyes was a wary intentness. Dutch meant trouble. He had come with the deliberate intention of making it.

Friends had brought to McClintock the word that he had better look out for Dutch. The bad man was jealous of his popularity, his influence in the camp, and above all of the fearlessness that would not accept intimidation. Shrewdly, with that instinct for safety common to all killers, the fellow had chosen his moment well. All the advantage would lie with him. The hands of the dealer must be above the table sliding out cards. His own could be on the butts of his six-shooters before he called for a showdown. What Dutch proposed was not a duel but deliberate cold-blooded murder.

Scot knew this. He knew, too, that if either of his hands lifted for an instant from the cards the ruffian opposite would fling slug after slug into his body. Nor could he expect any help from the lookout for the game. Dutch was too sure on the shoot to tempt interference.

The roulette wheel continued to turn. The stud and draw poker games went on. Automatically men made their bets, but the interest was gone from their play. The atmosphere had grown electric. The furtive attention of everybody focussed on two men, the killer and the victim he had selected. When would Dutch find his excuse to strike? In the tenseness of the suspense throats parched and nerves grew taut.

The contrast between the two men was striking. The one dealing the cards was clean-cut, graceful, and lithe as a tiger. From head to foot he was trim and well-groomed. Even the fingernails were polished pink in the latest San Francisco fashion. The huge man in front of him was dirty, his hair and beard unkempt, his figure slouchy. The long army overcoat he wore was splashed with mud. He looked the incarnation of brute force dominated by craft instead of intelligence.

Into the Crystal Palace a lean sun-and-wind browned man walked. He was about to start back to take his run on the pony express and he had come in to say good-bye to his brother. With one clear-eyed steady look he realized the situation. The gunman had not yet called for a showdown. He meant to choose his own time for fastening the quarrel on Scot. His rage might still be diverted into another channel.

Hugh did his thinking as he moved lightly for-

ward. There was not a break in his stride as he walked straight to the faro table. Carelessly, it appeared, but really by cool design, he chose the place next to Dutch, close to him and on his right.

"Don't crowd, young fella," warned the bully heavily. "Me, when I play, I want room a-plenty."

The pony express rider tossed a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table. "Chips," he said, without even looking at Dutch.

The eyes of the McClintocks met. Hugh was no gambler. He was sitting in, Scot knew, to share and lessen the risk. If he could draw the gunman's attention for even an instant at the critical moment it might save the dealer's life. A stack of chips slid across to the boy.

The big ruffian slammed down a fist like a ham, so that the chips jumped. "Didja hear me speak, kid? Know who I am?" he blustered.

The sun streamed full on the boy's fair curly head from the window above. It brought out the faint golden down on his lean cheek and emphasized a certain cherubic innocence of gaze that still lingered from his childhood.

"Why, no, I don't reckon I do."

"I'm Sam Dutch."

Hugh coppered two of the big man's bets and played the jack to win. "Knew a fellow called Dutch once—hanged for stealing sheep from the Mormons. No kin, maybe," he said cheerfully.

The lookout stirred uneasily, then stepped from the place where he sat and disappeared through a side door. The cards slid out of the box. Hugh won both bets he had coppered. Scot sized up chips to match the bets, and the boy drew them in with his left hand.

Dutch turned to him a face distorted as a gargoyle. "Play yore own game and keep off'n the cards I play. An' don't get heavy with me," he snarled with an oath.

"Sure not," Hugh promised amiably. "It was down on the Humboldt Sink they hanged him, I recollect."

The bad man thrust his unkempt head closer. "Get outa here. You're crowdin' me. I don't want my private graveyard to hold no kid-size coffins."

"Room for both of us," said Hugh coolly, and he did not give a fraction of an inch. Instead, he coppered another of the camp bully's bets, playing the ace to lose.

"Not room for me an' you here both. I tell you I'm Sam Dutch."

Scot slid out the cards. The ace lost.

"Yes, I heard you—no need to shout," Hugh said tranquilly, reaching for his winnings.

Dutch brushed his arm aside roughly. He raked in the chips. "I'll collect on that ace," he announced.

"You played it to win and it lost," Hugh told him.

"Did I?" The killer was dangerously near explosion point. "Don't forget, young fella, that I'm chief in this town."

Hugh looked straight at him, his blue eyes narrowed ever so little. "So? Who elected you?"

This cool defiance from an unknown smooth-cheeked boy put the match to the ruffian's rage. He snatched from his head the Peruvian hat and stamped it under his feet. His teeth ground savagely. He stooped as though to leap, and as he did so his fingers closed on the horn handle of the bowie projecting from his boot leg. The long blade flashed in the sunlight.

Almost simultaneously a derringer and a navy revolver flamed.

A stupid puzzled expression gathered on the face of the man in the army overcoat. He seemed to be groping for the meaning of what had happened. The huge body swayed and the bowie clattered to the floor.

Both brothers watched the killer intently. Neither fired a second shot, though every sense, nerve, and muscle waited in readiness for instant action.

Dutch clutched at the faro table with both hands, then unexpectedly pitched forward upon it, scattering chips and cards in all directions.

From behind the bar, from back of chairs and tables, men cautiously emerged. Others gathered

themselves from the floor where they had been lying low. The lookout stuck a head carefully through the side doorway. There would be no more shooting.

Scot spoke quietly. "I take you all to witness, gentlemen, that he came here looking for trouble. My brother and I fired in self-defence."

Someone thrust a hand under the big body and pushed aside the blue coat. "Heart's still beating," he announced.

"Then send for a doctor and have him looked after. I'll pay the bill," Scot said, still in an even expressionless voice.

"Hadn't you better finish the job?" a voice whispered in Hugh's ear.

Hugh turned, dizzy with nausea. "God, no!" he answered.

"If he lives he'll get you sure—both of you."

"We're not murderers," the boy said.

He groped his way to a chair and sat down quickly. Was he going to faint?

A hand fell on his shoulder. Through a haze Scot's voice came warm and low: "Good old Hugh. Saved my life sure. You were that cool—and game. Every move you made counted. If you hadn't devilled him till he lost his head he'd likely have got one of us. Boy, I'm proud of you."

Hugh was ashamed of his weakness. "I didn't play the baby this away when I got that Piute at the pass," he said apologetically

"Nothing to it, boy. You came through fine. Except for you—well, I would have cashed in. Come. Let's get out of here."

The owner of the Crystal Palace was standing near.

"Can you get someone else to finish my shift?" Scot asked.

"Sure." The proprietor did a little legitimate grumbling. "There's sixty-five saloons in this town, an' I'll be doggoned if everybody doesn't come here to do their gun stuff. Seems like a man will walk clear up from Gold Hill so's to pull off his fireworks at the Crystal. It don't do business no good, lemme tell you."

"You're out of luck," his dealer smiled. "But we couldn't really help it this time."

"I don't say you could, Scot. I won't mourn for Sam Dutch if you've got him. All I say is I try to run a quiet, respectable place an' looks like I never get a chance."

The brothers walked out to the street. Patrons of the place fell back to let them pass and followed with their eyes the two straight, light-stepping men. Hugh was still a little stringy in build, but even in his immaturity it would have been hard to find a more promising-looking youngster. As for Scot, he was acknowledged to be the handsomest man in the diggings. No woman ever saw him pass without wanting to look at him twice.

The news had swept through town already, and as

the brothers walked down the street a hundred men stopped to shake hands with and congratulate them. But even now they whispered their approval. It was possible Dutch might survive his wounds, in which case they were prepared to resume ostensible neutrality. The killer's name was one that sent the chills down the backs of even courageous men. He was more deadly than a rattlesnake because he usually did not give warning before he struck.

CHAPTER VII

VICKY TELLS SECRETS

AFTER what had just taken place at the Crystal Palace the bright sunshine of Nevada was welcome to both brothers. Inside the gambling house had been unwholesome excitement, passion, the dregs of cruel murder lust, and the shadow of death. In the open street were friendly faces, a sane world going about its business, and God's sun in the heavens. The McClintocks had probably snuffed out a life. It had been one horribly distorted by evil. None the less, it shook their composure to have sent even such a soul to its last account. They wanted, if possible, to forget completely the look on the face of that huge figure collapsing upon the table.

A little girl stood squarely in front of them on the broken sidewalk. To the casual eye she appeared all patches, flying hair, and knobby legs. There was the shy wildness of a captured forest creature in her manner, but in her small body the McClintocks sensed, too, a dauntless spirit.

"Mister Goodmans," she said, addressing them both, "don't you 'member me?"

"Of course. You're Vicky," Scot told her.

She came directly to business. "Rob, he's 'most always drunk 'n we ain't got nothin' to eat. Mollie 'n me's jist awful hungry."

"Hungry? Good Lord!" cried Hugh.

His brother took charge of the situation. "Go in to Groton's with Vicky and get her a good dinner. I'll see what supplies I can pick up and go down to the wagon with them."

In front of the Delta saloon Scot met a Washoe Indian. He was carrying a half a sack of wild onions he had brought to town to trade. McClintock did business with him on the spot. At Lyman Jones's store the faro dealer bought some rice and coffee. He also induced the merchant to let him have the last five pounds of flour he had in stock. With these supplies he tramped to the edge of town to the place where the Dodsons had moved their camp.

He ploughed through heavy sand, up a steep slope of shale and loose rubble, to a narrow flat where the prairie schooner stood. Mollie Dodson must have heard him coming, for as he reached the wagon she called from within:

"Did you find Rob, Vicky?"

Perhaps the firmness of his tread told her at once of her mistake. She leaned out of the open flap and caught sight of Scot. Into her white face the colour

beat in waves. Startled eyes held to his with a surprised question in them.

"I—I was looking for Vicky," she said.

"Yes. I met Vicky." His white teeth flashed in a smile that sought to win her confidence. "That young lady has a lot of sense. She wanted to know why the trustees of the Virginia Dodson Fund were not attending to business. So I'm here."

"Oh! Vicky oughtn't to have done that." Another surge of colour, born of shame, swept into the cheeks.

For the first time Scot realized how very pretty she was. He found her diffidence charming, for he lived in a world where the women he knew could not afford to be shy.

"Vicky did just right," he protested while he was opening his sack. "Our baby must be well fed. It's my business to see to that, and I'm going to do it from now."

He built a fire while she watched him, the baby in her arms. Mollie was acutely uncomfortable. The gambler had taken off his coat in order that his movements might be freer. In his figured waistcoat, frilled cambric shirt, close-fitting trousers, and varnished boots he looked too exquisite for menial labour. She was acutely conscious of her patched and faded gingham. It was Cophetua and the beggar maid brought down to date, except that she was a wife and not a girl.

"I wish—you wouldn't," she stammered.

He stood up, masterful and dominant. His glance swept round and found a battered water bucket. "Where's the spring, Mrs. Dodson?" he asked.

"Let me go," she begged. "It's—it's quite a way."

"I'm feeling better to-day. Maybe I can make it to the spring and back," he said, smiling. "Which way, please?"

Reluctantly she pointed to the spring. It was in an arroyo nearly a quarter of a mile distant.

"Robert forgot to get water before he left. He's —away looking for work," she explained with a slight tremor of the lips.

He liked her better for the little lie. Scot guessed that Dodson had not been at the camp for several days. He had seen the man in town yesterday drunk, and again to-day sleeping under an empty wagon in a vacant lot. It was a safe bet that Mollie Dodson carried the water for the family use.

Scot returned with the water and made a batch of biscuits and some hot coffee. While she ate he put rice on to boil.

When he looked at her he saw tears in her brown eyes. She was choking over the food and trying to prevent him from seeing it. He decided that this was a time for plain talk.

"I reckon I can guess how you feel," he said gently.

"But that's not the right angle to look at this thing. Back where you come from persons that take help from others are—well, they don't hold their heads up. But this is the West, a new country. The camp's short of food. It can't be bought in the market unless you know the ropes. We share with each other here. In a kind of way we're all one big family. I'm your big brother, and I'm certainly going to see this baby is fed proper."

She murmured something he could not catch for the break in her voice. He bustled about the fire cheerfully and let her alone till she had regained control of herself.

By which time Hugh and Vicky arrived, that long-legged young lady skipping on the hilltops, with high-pitched voluble comment.

"Looky. Looky here, Sister Mollie, what I got," she cried in her eager breathless fashion. "He got it for me, Mister—Mister Santa Claus." One finger pointed straight at Hugh while she held out for the inspection of her sister a doll with blue eyes and flaxen hair.

"Oh, but you shouldn't—you ought not," Mollie protested to the boy. "Did she ask you for it?"

"No, ma'am. I wanted to get it for her. It was the only doll for sale in Virginia, far as I know. I been hankerin' to buy that doll. Now I feel a heap better."

Vicky herself was so clearly in a seventh heaven of

delight that her sister had not the heart to say anything more about it. But she was uneasy in her mind. She wondered if their obligations to these young men would never end. What would Rob say? How would he make her pay for the charity he had forced her to accept?

In the days that followed she had occasion many times to feel weighted by the kindnesses of Scot McClintock. Hugh had departed to report for duty with the express company, but his brother made it a point to see that the little family in the prairie schooner did not lack for food.

He hunted the cañons and brought back a young buck deer with him. One hind quarter of it went to Mollie Dodson to keep the pot boiling. Fish, rabbits, a prairie hen, three dozen eggs brought by a rancher all the way from Honey Lake Valley; these and other delicacies were forced upon the protesting woman.

Robert Dodson's attitude was one of sneering suspicion. He was willing that another man should supply his family with the food it needed, but he was mean enough to jeer at his wife and bully her because of it. Even while he ate the meat brought by McClintock his tongue was a whip that lashed Mollie and the man. His whole attitude implied that the two were carrying on a clandestine love affair.

Mollie wept herself to sleep more nights than one. By nature a dependent woman, she did not now know which way to turn. Her husband was a broken reed. He no longer even pretended to be looking for work. Humiliating though it was, she had to accept Scot's favours. She could not let the family starve. A thousand times Robert Dodson had trampled her pride and affection in the dust. She knew that life with him held nothing for her, but it must go on through the long gray years that stretched ahead till the end of things. She was not the sort of woman to contemplate suicide with any fortitude. Both the courage and the cowardice for it she lacked.

Scot returned from the Dodson camp one day, lips close set and eyes dangerously lit with a smouldering fire. Mollie was nursing a black eye. She had fallen, she told him, against the corner of the wagon. He had not believed her when she told this tremulous lie. But Vicky had settled the matter past doubt. She was waiting for him in a little gulch near the camp, waiting to tell him in a burst of impotent childish passion that Dodson had beaten Mollie because she did not have supper ready for him when he came home hours after the fire was out.

As it chanced, McClintock met the ne'er-do-well a hundred yards farther down the gulch. Dodson was, for a wonder, sober. He had no money of his

own and he had been unable to wheedle many free drinks from miners.

At sight of the gambler Dodson scowled. He had plenty of reasons for disliking Scot. He nursed a continuous spleen because he would not let him get at the money collected for the baby. His pride suffered at accepting favours from a man who scorned him. He was jealous of the interest McClintock must have aroused in his "woman," Mollie Dodson. No matter how he stormed and sneered at her he could not keep her mind from a comparison of the men who just now were most present in her life, and in that silent judgment he knew he must play a sorry part.

The bummer, to use the phrase of the day, would have passed without speaking. A sulky dignity was the rôle he judged the most effective. But Scot caught him by the coat lapel and swung him sharply round.

"I'm going to teach you not to lay a hand on—on a woman," McClintock said, his voice thick with suppressed passion.

Dodson's thin mask of offended dignity fell away instantly. He tried to back off, snarling at the man whose steel grip held him.

"She's been tellin' lies on me, has she?" he retorted, showing his teeth.

"Mrs. Dodson says she fell against the wagon. I don't believe it. You struck her, you yellow wolf.

Right now I'm going to give you the thrashing of your life."

The eyes of the loafer flashed fear. "You lemme go," he panted, trying to break away. "Don't you dass touch me. Think I don't know about you an' her? Think I'm a plumb idjit?"

An open-handed smash across the mouth stopped his words. He made a swift pass with his right hand. Scot's left shot out and caught the wrist, twisting it back and up. A bullet was flung into the sky; then, under the urge of a pain which leaped from wrist to shoulder of the tortured arm, the revolver dropped harmlessly to the ground.

"Goddlemighty, you're breakin' my arm," Dodson shrieked, sagging at the knees as he gave to the pressure.

Scot sent home a stiff right. "You'll be nursing a black eye from that to-morrow," he said evenly.

The craven in Dodson came out at once. He tried to escape punishment by whining and begging. He promised anything the other man might demand of him. He made an attempt to fling himself to the ground and cover up. McClintock set his teeth and went through with the job.

Afterwards to the bully who lay on the sand sobbing with rage and pain, he gave curt orders. "You'll go back to town and not show up at the wagon to-night. To-morrow you'll tell Mrs. Dodson you had a fight. You'll not tell her who with or

what it was about. If you ever lay a hand on her again or on Vicky, I'll break every bone in your body. Understand?"

The beaten man gulped out what might be taken for an assent.

Scot turned away, sick at heart. Already he questioned the wisdom of what he had done.

CHAPTER VIII

SCOT OFFERS HEALTH HINTS

A WASHOE zephyr was playing impish tricks in Virginia City. It screamed down the side of Mt. Davidson in a gale of laughter, filling the air with the white powder of alkali dust. It snatched hats from unwary heads and sent them flying into the cleft cañon below which led through the hills to the sage desert. It swooped up a dog on A Street and dropped the yelping cur down the chimney of a shack on B Street. Boards were ripped from fences and sucked straight into the air for fifty feet. A basket of duck eggs took premature flight from a farmer's wagon, sailed through the window of a barber shop, and gave a customer in the chair a free egg shampoo. The wind came in ribald gusts, tremendous, filled with jeering howls.

About Virginia City there have been many disputes, but nobody who lived there in the 'sixties ever denied that it was the windiest spot on earth. The town slanted like a steep roof, each street a terrace. During the zephyrs all sorts of possessions came rolling downhill like tumbleweeds. They

ranged in size from a spool of thread to the roof of a house.

Scot McClintock, working his way along B Street, took refuge in a hurdy-gurdy[1] near Union. The noise of a piano, of fiddles, of stamping feet, filled the hall. The place was flooded with light from kerosene lamps set in candelabras with crystal pendants. At one side of the room was the inevitable bar.

A blonde young woman of Teutonic descent joined Scot. "Would you like to dance, Mr. McClintock?" she asked deferentially.

"Not to-night, thank you," he answered with the grave respect he gave all women.

His glance swept the hall, was arrested at a small group near the farther end of the bar. The central figure of it was a huge rough-bearded man with long hair flowing to his shoulders. He wore an army overcoat, dusty boots, and Mexican spurs.

The girl's eyes gave a signal of alarm. She had forgotten for the moment about the affair between the McClintocks and Sam Dutch.

"First time he's been down," she whispered. "He has not yet seen you already. If you like—the door——"

[1]An unsual feature of Virginia City was the hurdy-gurdy house. In the early days it was quite respectable, at least from the Western point of view. The girls were generally Germans. Their business was to dance with the miners and to lead them afterwards to the bar for a drink. Most of the girls saved their money to send home to their parents overseas. Serious-minded young women, they often married well and happily. Later, these houses degenerated.—W. M. R.

Scot smiled grimly. He had a picture of himself slipping out of the door to avoid Sam Dutch.

It was his temperament always to take the bull by the horns. He stepped across the dance floor to the bar, and stood at the elbow of the desperado.

Dutch, clinking glasses with a girl, looked round to see his enemy before him. He was taken at a disadvantage. Was this a trap set for him? If he made a move would the younger McClintock or some other ally of the gambler fill him full of slugs? Nervously his eyes stole round the big room. They came back to the clean, straight figure standing in front of him.

"No place for you, Dutch," the faro dealer said curtly. "Not good for your health. You've got a weak heart, you know. It's likely to stop working altogether if you're not careful of yourself. Go home —now—right away—and stay there till the stage leaves. This is an unhealthy altitude for you. Try Aurora or Dayton."

The bad man moistened his dry lips with his tongue. Tiny beads of moisture stood out on his forehead. He had come to the parting of the ways and knew it. If he let this man drive him from the house he could never hold up his head in Virginia again. His reign as chief would be ended here. Should he take a chance and draw? He had killed many men. This gambler, so far as he knew, had

never got one. Why not now? This very instant. It would all be over in a flash.

And yet—he could not do it. With McClintock's cold and steely stare in his he could not drop the glass from his hand and reach for a revolver. The wills of the two clashed, fought out the battle, and the stronger won.

The gaze of the killer fell away and slid round the hall in a furtive search for help. It found none. He was playing a lone hand. The way out must be one of his own choosing. Of all these men and women who watched this crisis so tensely not one but would be glad to see him blotted out of existence. His hand was against every man's. That was the penalty he paid for his reputation.

Again his tongue went out to moisten dry lips.

"I—I reckon you're right," he heard himself say huskily. "I ain't feelin' good yet. Fact is, I'm still a sick man. Mebbe I better go home. I was thinkin' thataway myself before you came in."

"Keep right on thinking it. Think yourself out of Virginia inside of twenty-four hours," ordered Scot implacably.

Dutch drained the glass and put it down shakily on the bar. He laughed with attempted bravado and swaggered to the door. There he turned.

"Meet up with you again one o' these days, Mr. McClintock," he said, his voice and manner a threat.

Scot said nothing. Not for an instant did his

unwavering eyes release the man till the door had shut behind him. Then, quickly, disregarding the hands of congratulation thrust at him, he pushed through the crowd and passed from the rear of the building. He had no intention of letting himself be a target for a shot through the window.

The discredited killer did not leave by stage. He went out in a private buckboard to Carson, from whence he drifted to the new camp Aurora, already the largest town in that section of Nevada. His self-esteem and public repute, shaken by the showdown in the hurdy-gurdy house, were shortly restored by a rencontre with another bad man. He shot his victim in the stomach while they were drinking together, after which he was cock of the walk at Aurora.

CHAPTER IX

SCOT TALKS ON MOTHER LOVE

THE weeks passed, became months. Spring browned to summer and summer crisped to autumn. Hugh and Scot saw nothing of each other. The younger brother had given up riding and joined a gold rush to a new camp; the older was still dealing faro at the Crystal Palace.

The Dodsons were yet camped on the outskirts of Virginia. The man of the family spent most of his time hanging around saloons and dance halls. Rarely he did a day's work. Usually he secured food and drink for himself by acting as janitor at some of the places which he frequented. For weeks at a time his wife never saw him.

Scot McClintock no longer visited the dugout beside the prairie schooner. The last time he had seen Mollie Dodson was the day when he had thrashd the bully to whom she was married. He did his kindnesses by proxy now. The missionary from Buffalo, New York, Calvin Baird by name, was his deputy in supplying the needs of the Dodson family. Sometimes Vicky reported to him, but he saw very little even of her.

Then, one day, Vicky came to him at the International Hotel, where he lived, and sent up word that she wanted to see him. Scot came down and found the face of his little friend wan and tear-stained.

"What's wrong, Vicky?" he asked, slipping his arm round her shoulder.

She began to sob, and through her broken words he gathered the story. Dodson had come home drunk while his wife was getting a bucket of water, had flung himself on the bed without seeing the baby, and had fallen at once into heavy stertorous slumber. When Mollie got back the child was dead, smothered by her own father.

Scot borrowed a horse and rode out at once to the camp. Dodson had temporarily disappeared, frightened at the horrible thing he had done. The accident had taken place twelve hours earlier, and the tears of the mother were for the moment spent. She was dry-eyed and wan, in that deep despair which is beyond expression, almost beyond feeling. With a tenderness that set flowing in Scot a wild river of sympathy she drew back the cotton handkerchief that covered the baby face. For an instant his heart beat fast. Except for the pallor Virginia looked so natural she might have been asleep. He half-expected to see the lashes tremble and the blue eyes open.

McClintock took on himself all the arrangements

for the funeral. He dragged Dodson out of a grog shop, soused his head in a horse trough, and when he became sober saw that he remained so until the burial.

The day after the interment Scot called on Mrs. Dodson. Her husband was not at the camp.

Presently he came plump to the purpose of his visit. He was never a spendthrift of words.

"What are you and Vicky going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," the bereaved mother answered listlessly. "Vicky ought not to stay here. It's not right. But I've no place to send her."

"Mr. Stewart and I have discussed that. We've talked with some of the business men of the town. If you're willing we'll divert the baby's fund to Vicky and send her down to Miss Clapp's school at Carson. She'll be well taken care of there. Miss Clapp is a fine woman. Does it seem to you a good idea?"

Tears brimmed to her eyes. "You're good. I can never repay you. I—I'll be awf'lly lonesome without her, but if you think it best——"

"It's not what I think but what you think," he said gently.

"Could I see her sometimes?"

"As often as you like. She would spend her vacations with you, of course."

The lump in her throat began to ache again. Her gaze travelled beyond the cañon below, across the

Twenty-Six Mile Desert and the Forty Mile Desert to the Pine Nut Mountains. There it rested for a long time. She drew in her breath with a deep ragged sigh that was almost a sob. "She'd better go. This is no life for a little girl. I want her to have a chance to—to—be happy and live with good people."

"Is it any life for a young woman to lead?" he asked, his blue eyes fixed steadily on her.

A faint flag of colour fluttered in her wan cheeks. He had never before broken down the outposts of her reserve. She felt her pulse beating. His impersonal friendliness had suddenly become a close and vital thing.

"Why speak of that? I made my choice years ago," she said. She thought, but did not say, that the hard and bitter facts of existence cannot be talked away. They are as immovable as the Sierras.

"We have to make fresh choices every day," he told her. "Do you think your life can go on now the same as it did before? It can't. There's a gulf between you and—him. Have you any hope that it can be bridged?"

"No."

"Or that you can do him any good by staying with him?"

"No."

"Then why should you make deliberate shipwreck of your life—or let him do it for you? Just

now you don't care what becomes of you. But you have to keep on the best you can."

He spoke quietly, his words unstressed, but just for a flash she caught in his eyes an expression that told her his emotions were a banked volcano. Mollie found herself trembling.

"No—no. I married him, for better or worse. I'll stay with him."

"Can you stay with him when he doesn't want you, when he won't stay with you?"

"Perhaps he'll change," she murmured.

The knuckles of his clenched hand were bloodless, she noticed

"Men of his age don't change. They're what they have made themselves. They can't be anything else. Would you waste your life on such an impossible chance? Don't do it. Begin again."

"How?" she asked.

"There's work at Virginia for a hundred women. You can mend clothes or cook or keep boarders—anything for a start. Afterwards——" He let the future take care of itself.

In spite of her dependence Mollie had a capacity for dumb resistance. Scot left her knowing that he had the empty victory of having convinced her judgment but not the deep instinct in her born of habit and tradition.

He walked down the grade past dugouts, shanties, and lean-tos. Occasionally he could hear the blast

of dynamite. He passed bull teams hauling hay from the Truckee Meadows, the drivers cracking long-lashed whips with short hickory handles. Freight outfits, wood haulers, and ore wagons filled the road. Everywhere was the bustle and activity that go with the early years of a new and prosperous mining camp. He was aware of it all only subconsciously, for his mind was filled with thoughts of the woman he had just left.

A medley of voices, a whirl of excited men, roused him from reflection as he reached the end of the business part of town. Just now he was not looking for crowds. He turned to make the climb to A Street when a voice hailed him.

"Just in time, Scot. We're aimin' to hang Dodson. Come on, old scout."

McClintock stood rooted. Here was an easy way for Mollie out of her troubles. All he had to do was to keep on walking up hill and the matter would settle itself. It was none of his business. If Virginia City had had enough of the ne'er-do-well the matter was one for it to pass upon. The fellow was not worth a short bit anyhow. Scot's judgment was that he was better dead.

None the less he found it impossible to keep on up the hill. He walked toward the mob and pushed a way through with his broad shoulders to the cowering wretch with the rope around his neck.

Dodson sank down and clung to McClintock's

knees. "Save me," he begged, his face ashen gray.

"What's he done?" asked Scot of the man who seemed to be the leader.

"You know what the drunken bummer did—killed his own baby. Then when Jerry Mulligan told him what for an hour ago he stuck a knife in him."

"Is Jerry dead?"

"No. Not yet. Doc says maybe he'll die."

"Jerry have a six-shooter out?"

"No."

"He was gonna attack me. It was self-defence," the grovelling man pleaded.

One of the crowd spoke: "This Dodson's bad—bad clear to the bottom of his heart. He's been talkin' about his wife to make excuses for what he did."

"Let's wait, boys," Scot said. "Maybe Jerry will pull through."

"No, let's finish the job, Scot. This fellow's no good, anyhow. You know it. So do we." Jean Poulette, the owner of a gambling house, pushed to the front.

"I'm not thinking about him, Jean. I'm thinking about that little mother in the prairie schooner. She's got trouble enough already, hasn't she? Do you want to pile on more—to send her through life marked as the wife of a man that was hanged? Ain't that rather rough on her, boys?"

"She'll be well rid of him," a voice cried.

"Sure," agreed McClintock. "But not that way. I don't say this drunken loafer is worth saving. But we can't hang him without striking a blow at her. She's sensitive, boys. It would hurt her 'way down deep."

"Sho! Tha's foolishness, Scot. It'd be a li'l shock at first maybe, but afterwards she'd just naturally be plumb pleased. Any of us would in her place."

"Say, who started this gabfest?" demanded the man holding the other end of the rope that had been slipped over Dodson's head. "Let's hustle this job through. I got a man to meet right soon."

McClintock met him eye to eye. "You can go meet him right now, Six-Fingered Pete. The hanging's off."

"Who says it's off?" blustered Pete.

"I say so." Scot spoke quietly, his voice low and clear.

"Someone elect you judge and jury, Scot?" asked Poulette.

"Sorry to interfere, boys. I've just come in from seeing Mrs. Dodson. She's all broke up about the baby. You wouldn't want to make things harder for her. It doesn't matter a billy-be-damn whether this fellow lives or dies. Nobody cares about him. He's nothing. We'll hold him till we see how Jerry comes out—just stick him in the calaboose."

If Scot was a dominating figure in the life of the camp it was not because men walked in fear of him. He never looked for trouble or avoided it. He never used his splendid strength and courage to bully those weaker than himself. Even old Tom Todd, the Negro roustabout who was the butt of the camp jokes, always met with respect from the dealer at the Crystal. His influence was born of liking and admiration. It maintained itself without effort on his part because he had the qualities of leadership.

It was a part of his gift that he made men want to follow the path he took. He usually knew exactly in what direction he wanted to go, but he never hectored or was overbearing.

Poulette felt within himself a response to Scot's warm appealing smile, but he was ashamed to make a direct face about. "Might as well go through now. You can't ever do justice without hurtin' some woman somewhere."

"An' this bummer ce'tainly is ripe for a rope," added Pete.

"I wouldn't lift a hand for him," Scot answered. "I'm still thinking of that mother's aching heart, boys. Not one of us here was ever good enough to his mother. We're a hard, tough lot. We've travelled a heap of crooked trails since we were kids at our mothers' knees. Pete, you hard-boiled old sinner, I met your mother in Sacramento last year, and that little lady began to tell me about what a

good boy you've always been to her, how you send her money now, and how when you were a freckled runt of a ten-year-old——"

Red as a beet, Pete interrupted roughly: "Oh, hire a hall, Scot."

McClintock pushed his advantage home. The theme of his talk was mother love. These big, overgrown boys reacted to it because each one of then had enshrined in his own heart the memory of a mother he had many times hurt and often neglected. The point Scot made was that they could now pay part of the debt they owed their own mothers. It scored heavily.

"I reckon Scot's right," someone spoke up. "If it's gonna worry the lady any, might as well postpone the necktie party."

Mobs are fickle and unstable of purpose. This one's mind began to veer. Inside of five minutes Scot had the members of the lynching party moulded to his view. They had no desire whatever to hang the poltroon who had stabbed their friend, or, at least, the desire was subordinated to a more imperative one.

The rescued man tried to whine out a blend of thanks and justification to the gambler.

Scot looked him over scornfully and turned on his heel without a word.

CHAPTER X

TILL TAPPING

THE loyalty Mollie had cherished to her early ideal of marriage burned low for lack of fuel to feed upon. Her husband had practically deserted her. When he returned to camp it was to bully money out of her or to get some of their small store of belongings to sell. In the intervals she might starve for all he cared.

There came a day when she definitely broke with her past life. She moved into town and opened a small shop where she sold home-cooked food to miners eager to buy her cakes, cookies, pies, and doughnuts. She called her place the Back Home Kitchen, and she did a thriving business. The members of the fire companies patronized the store a great deal, and since they ran to a large extent the political and social life of Virginia City, as they had done in San Francisco a few years earlier, her shop became so much the vogue that she had to employ a Chinese assistant to help with the cooking.

Scot watched the venture but offered no advice. He had, in fact, not spoken to Mollie since the day

after the funeral. Vicky had been taken to Carson by Hank Monk on the stage and was writing back badly spelled but enthusiastic letters to her sister. The cards had been re-shuffled, McClintock told himself, and he was no longer sitting in at the game.

Meanwhile, the new camps of Nevada went their humorous, turbulent, and homicidal way. Men grew wild over prospects that never had a chance to become real mines. They worked on croppings, sold and bought feet in a thousand prospects, struck it rich, went stony broke again within the month. They were in bonanza or in borrasca[1], and in either case kept their grins working. They lived in brush tents, sack tents, or dugouts, and the hard conditions never disturbed their happy-go-lucky optimism.

They shared their last pot of beans with a stranger and were gaily confident that to-morrow they would strike a pick into the glory hole.

The saving grace of American humour salted all their adventures. The law in particular, when it made its belated appearance, was a merry jest. Those who dispensed it and those who dispensed with it enjoyed the joke alike.

Two women in Carson quarrelled over a cow. One accused the other of milking it secretly. The

[1]The Mexicans used to say that a mine was in bonanza when its production was high, and in borrasca before the vein was struck or after it had pinched out. With the adoption of the terms by Americans, the words took on a more general application. A bonanza was then any highly profitable venture; a borrasca was the reverse.—W. M. R.

jury decided that the defendant was guilty of milking the cow in the second degree. A man in Virginia City was haled before the court charged with drunkenness, which in Nevada was held to be a right guaranteed a man by the Constitution. The constable Mike whispered to the justice that the arrested man had one hundred dollars on his person. "Are youse guilty?" the judge demanded. The defendant said he was not. "You know domn well yez are. I fine yez a hundred dollars, fifty for me an' fifty for Mike," the Court passed judgment. Sometimes the laugh was on the Court, as in the case of a justice, very hazy as to his powers and duties, who conducted the preliminary hearing of a man charged with murder. He listened to the evidence till he was satisfied, then announced his decision. "I find you guilty and sentence you to be hanged at ten o'clock to-morrow. The constable will bring the prisoner and a rope."

Even the homicidal mania of those who lived by their wits had its momentary gleams of dreadful humour. Scot drifted into a barber shop one day and found El Dorado Johnnie having his hair curled. The youth in the chair was dressed in new clothes. His boots had been polished. He was shaved and perfumed.

"Going to your wedding, Johnnie?" the faro dealer asked.

"No, sir," replied the other. "'Farmer' Peel has give out that he's gunnin' for me. If I'm elected as the corpse I want to look nice."

It turned out that Johnnie's forethought was wise. "Farmer" Peel shot quicker and straighter than he did. Peel, who had come from Salt Lake with a record of several killings, was arrested for having made a disturbance. He was fined and released on his own recognizance to go and raise the money. "Farmer" Peel sober was a pleasant, mild young fellow who wanted to be at peace with the world, but Peel drunk was a demon. Before he raised the money to pay his fine, he visited several saloons and had a change of heart. Back he went to the court, caught the justice by the beard, and mopped that dignitary all over the floor. Nobody intervened, for the drunken man was dangerous. The justice, released at last, had to be removed to the hospital for repairs. Virginia City merely grinned. Judge or no judge, every man had to play his own hand.

Offences against property were considered more serious than those against life. In some camps hired desperadoes jumped claims. Hold-ups were of frequent occurrence, and every few days a stage robbery was reported. Nevada was too busy developing the newly discovered ore veins to pay much attention to these excrescences from the normal.

In this rough, crude society Mollie moved with as

much safety as she could have done in a staid New England village. No ruffian could have molested her without the danger of being lynched. The only man who annoyed her was the one whose name she bore. When he discovered how well she was doing financially Dodson began to hang around the Back Home to bleed its mistress of what she earned.

Mollie was an easy victim. She never had been one to stand up for her own rights. She fought only feebly and without success to protect herself. Every day or two Dodson robbed the till.

He boasted of it to his cronies when he was half seas over. To Scot, who was keeping an eye on him in expectation of just such a possibility, the news was promptly carried. He learned that the man paid his visits to the Back Home in the evening.

Two days later Dodson knocked at the door of the shop and was admitted. He slouched forward to the counter and leered at the girl he had promised to love and protect.

"Come through, old woman."

"I can't. There's just enough for the rent," she pleaded.

"You're holdin' out on me. Tha's what you're doin'. I won't stand it—not a minute."

His eyes were glazed. He thrust his bullet head forward threateningly. Mollie recognized the signs of the abusive stage of intoxication. Presently he would begin to beat her if she opposed him. But

she was desperate. She could not let him take the rent money.

"You can't have it. That's all there's to it. You just can't have it," she cried.

Mollie flew to the till as the man came round the counter. She was between him and the money. He tried to thrust her to one side, but the space was narrow. For a few seconds he tugged at her in vain. Then his temper leaped out. He struck her again and again while she tried to shield herself from the blows.

Neither of them heard the door open or saw a man step into the room. Neither of them saw him take the counter in one flying leap. An arm reached out and plucked Dodson from his victim. It hurled him back against the wall, where he struck with great force, hung for a moment, and dropped limply to the floor.

Mollie lifted her eyes to those of Scot McClintock and into the white face came two flaming flowers. For in the eyes that burned down into hers she read that which brought a burst of music into her heart. She had fought against this—oh, how she had schooled herself to deny it! But with his strong arms round her, his heart beating against her own, what was the use of pretending any longer? Her supple body made a little motion of nestling closer. She began to sob quietly.

"He—he——"

Scot brushed her explanation aside. "Forget him. He's out of your life. It's you and I now. I kept away. I gave him his chance. I gave you yours to go it alone. That's ended. I'm going to take care of you now."

He lifted her flushed face and kissed it.

That kiss stirred to life all the Puritan blood of Mollie, the racial inheritance from a rock-ribbed ancestry. She pushed him from her with all the force of a despairing energy.

"No . . . no . . . no!" she cried, and fled to the room back of the shop.

She was afraid of his passionate tenderness for her, but she was afraid, too, of the deep yearning of her whole being for the love he offered.

In the days that followed Scot McClintock fought the fight of his life. He had always prided himself that he was master of his desires. When he yielded to self-indulgence it was because he chose to follow for a time the path of dalliance. But this keen-edged longing for the woman he loved flooded his being, swept over him like great waves over a bather in the surf. It set him fifty times pacing the floor, to and fro, to and fro. For the first time in his life he learned that he had nerves. There was a passionate urge in him to take what he wanted. He could make her happy in spite of all the tongues that would clack, in spite of cynical smiles and hard unforgiveness on the part of the world.

But could he? Would his love be enough to insure Mollie's happiness if he overbore her scruples? He knew it would not. There was in her a something fine and flowerlike that blossomed shyly through all the sordid impedimenta of her life. If he snatched at her, as a child does at a rose, the fragrant beauty of her would be crushed and lost.

Yet Scot knew that it was the best of him that wanted her. This was the real thing that had come to him at last. Love had penetrated the folly and waste of his life. Its rapier thrust had pushed through the conceits of manner and dress in which he had wrapped himself. It called to the simple elemental manhood in him.

He knew how his world would take it if he eloped with Mollie. His old father, Alexander McClintock, a Bible-reading Presbyterian of granitic faith, would cast him off with a gesture worthy of the ancient prophets. Hugh would be hurt and shocked, but he would not give him up. Virginia City would be interested but not outraged, for the town had by this time become accustomed to unexpected shifts in marital relations. The legal divorce had not yet reached Nevada, but a simple substitute for it was not infrequent. Many young women who had come from the East by way of the Overland Trail had found the long desert trip destructive of romance and had deserted their rough and weatherworn husbands for more devoted and attractive lovers.

In Mollie's case the camp would find extenuating circumstances. Dodson was a ne'er-do-well of a particularly despicable type. He was a shiftless, wife-beating drunkard. It had not been his fault that Jerry Mulligan had persisted in recovering from the knife thrust in his side. Moreover, Scot was known to be no Lothario. The general verdict would be that it was nobody's affair but that of the principals. If Dodson felt aggrieved he could always appeal to Judge Colt as a court of last resort.

Yes, but Scot had to think of Mollie herself—of Mollie into whose cheeks he could send the delicate colour flying, whose pulses he could set beating with a burst of music in her heart. The thought of her drenched him with despair. How could he protect her if he remained a stranger in her life? Yet if he broke the code with her he would be saving her from distress only to plunge her into greater trouble.

CHAPTER XI

"TWENTY-FOUR HOURS TO GET OUT"

HUGH wrote Scot from Aurora, where the boy was filling a wood contract. He proposed that Scot join him in the new camp. The older brother declined. He could not leave the neighbourhood of Mollie till he was assured she had the strength to manage her own affairs. He had once told her he meant to be her big brother. At least he could be that.

Aurora was a gold camp in the first flush of its prosperity. The town was built in a gulch, below which lie narrow, crooked cañons. The history of the camp, in its essential aspects, parallels that of a dozen others. Its first inhabitants were hard-working prospectors, prosaic grubbers who respected each other's rights and lent a kindly hand to the neighbour in the next-door tent. But after the "glory hole" was struck and the population began to climb came an influx of parasites—gamblers, desperadoes, and road agents. A small percentage of the population, they leavened the whole. Down Virgin Cañon, by stage or on horseback, came John

Daily, James Masterson, Sam Dutch, William Buckley, and John McDowell, alias Three-Fingered Jack. They were the advance guard of a hundred others of like mind, hard-visaged "man eaters" whose trigger fingers always itched. They made Aurora sit up on its hind legs and howl.

Two rival gangs operated, one from San Francisco, the other from Sacramento. Between them they ran the town. There was a reign of lawlessness. Juries were afraid to convict. Judges and sheriffs were timid about pushing cases. Sam Dutch, king of the killers, boasted that he was chief. He was suspicious of everybody and never sat except with his back to a wall. In the evening he always saw that the curtains were down. He was for ever watching for the inevitable hour when some other bad man would challenge his supremacy and perhaps cut short his career. This suspense increased his deadliness. He could not afford to wait for an even break because he could not fathom an opponent's mind and know just when he might elect to draw steel. Wherefore, like the rest of his kind, he killed unnecessarily without provocation. His theory was that dead men are harmless.

When Hugh knew that Dutch was in town he prepared for the trouble he foresaw. Every day he practised with his navy revolver when he was up in the hills with his woodchoppers. Every night in his cabin he carefully oiled and loaded the weapon.

He, too, improvised curtains of gunny sacks for the window. When he went down Main Street he had eyes in the back of his head. For he knew that Dutch would assassinate him if possible.

Winter hangs on long at Aurora. There is no spring. The dry, torrid summer with its parching heat follows on the heels of frost. When Hugh arrived in June the cañons still held banked the winter snow. By the middle of July the gulch was a bakeshop.

It was late afternoon one sultry day when Hugh walked down the crooked business street of the town. He stopped in the shadow cast by the false front of a store.

A dog up Virgin Gulch was howling monotonously. A long, lank man, carelessly dressed, sat in a chair tilted back against the wall. One of his heels was hooked in a rung of the chair.

"If I owned a half-interest in that dog," he drawled lazily, "I believe I'd kill my half."

Hugh grinned and looked at the man. He had yellow hair, a great mop of it, and twinkling eyes heavily thatched by overhanging brows. He learned later that the man's name was Sam Clemens. The world came to know him better as Mark Twain.

A bearded miner who had come out of the store gave the remark his attention. "You couldn't do that, Sam," he said at length. "If you did that, don't you see you'd kill the whole dog?"

Clemens looked at the miner. "Maybe you're right. Anyhow, the other half would be too sick to howl," he said hopefully.

"If you owned the tail you could cut that off. Of if you owned one of the ears, say," explained the man with the beard. "I don't reckon your pardner could kick on that. But if you killed half the dog the rest of it would sure die. Any one can see that, Sam. You sure made a fool remark that time."

"Yes, I can see now you're right," the lank man agreed. "I must be out of my head. Probably the altitude."[1]

"O' course you could buy the other fellow's interest in the dog and then kill it," pursued the literal-minded one. "No objection to that, I reckon."

"Yes, I could do that—if someone would lend me the money. But I wouldn't, come to think of it." Clemens brightened up till he was almost cheerful. "I'd give the dog to you, Hank."

Attracted by the lank stranger's dry humour, Hugh reached for a three-cornered stool and started to sit down. He changed his mind abruptly. Out of a saloon next door, named the Glory Hole from Aurora's famous treasure lode, a big bearded man in an army coat came slouching. It was the first

[1]Mark Twain afterwards made use of this in one of his books. A good many bits of his humour can be traced to the days when he was a youth in Nevada.—W. M. R.

time Hugh had seen Sam Dutch since their meeting at the Crystal Palace.

The boy stood, slightly crouched, his right thumb hitched lightly in the pocket of his trousers. Every nerve was taut as a fiddle string. The eyes of McClintock, grown hard as quartz, did not waver a hair's breadth.

Dutch stood in front of the saloon a moment, uncertain which way to turn. He came toward the little group before the store. Apparently he was in arrears of sleep, for a cavernous yawn spread over and wrinkled his face.

The yawn came suddenly to a period and left the man gaping, his mouth ludicrously open. Evidently he was caught by complete surprise at sight of young McClintock.

"You here!" he presently growled.

Hugh said nothing. There is strength in silence when accompanied by a cold unwinking gaze.

Dutch made a mistake. He delivered an ultimatum.

"Twenty-four hours. I'll give you twenty-four hours to get out. If you're here then——" The threat needed no words to complete it.

Without lifting his eyes from the killer Hugh sidestepped to the middle of the road. If bullets began to fly he had no desire to endanger the bystanders.

"I'll be here," he said crisply. "If you feel that

way, no use waiting twenty-four hours. Come a-shootin'."

McClintock had no wish to start trouble. If he had known that Dutch was coming out of the Glory Hole he would have quietly absented himself. But the other man had forced the issue. The boy knew that any proposal to talk over the difficulty would have been regarded as a sign of weakness and would have precipitated an attack. Wherefore he had flung out his bold challenge.

The Chief of Main Street was startled. Some months since, this boy had tossed a defiance in his teeth. Before he had had time to draw a weapon two bullets had crashed into him. The psychology of a killer is peculiar. Down in the bottom of his heart he is as full of superstitions as a gambler. Dutch was no coward, though he fought like a wolf outside of the code that governed more decent men. But he was not used to men like the McClintocks. Other men, when he raved and threatened, spoke humbly and tried to wheedle him back to good humour. In the very silence with which these two faced him was something menacing and deadly that paralyzed his fury.

"Not now. Give you twenty-four hours," the big man snarled through his beard. He used the fighting epithet, applying it to Scot McClintock. "Like yore brother did me when I was feelin' sick an' triflin' an' all stove up. Get out. Hit the

trail on the jump. Or I'll sure collect you, kid or no kid."

"You're wasting time," Hugh said quietly.

The killer raved. He cursed savagely. But he did not draw his six-shooter. The man had his crafty reasons. This youngster was chain lightning on the shoot. The evidence of this was scarred on the body of Dutch. Moreover, he could probably take the boy at disadvantage later—get him from behind or when he came into a room dazed from the untempered light outside.

Spitting his warning, Dutch backed into the Glory Hole. "Not room for you'n me here both. Twenty-four hours. You done heard me."

The red-shirted miner Hank turned beaming on McClintock. He could appreciate this, though Clemens's humour was too much for him. "You blamed li'l' horn toad, if you didn't call a bluff on Dutch and make it stick."

He used the same epithet that the desperado had just employed, but as it fell from his lips the sting of it was gone. A few years later a senator from the sagebrush state had occasion to explain away this expression on the floor of the upper house of Congress. His version of it was that this was a term of endearment in Nevada. Sometimes it was. Then, again, sometimes it was not.

Hugh made no mistake. He had won the first brush, but he knew the real battle was still to come.

CHAPTER XII

"GIT OUT DE WAY, OLE DAN TUCKER"

HUGH was no hero of romance, but a normal American youth whose education from childhood had fitted him to meet the emergencies that might confront him. The school of the frontier teaches self-reliance. Every man must stand alone. He is judged by the way he assays after the acid test of danger.

At the Crystal Palace Hugh had not been conscious of any fear. His brother's life had depended upon his coolness, the smooth efficiency with which his nerves and muscles coördinated. Not until after the peril was past had he felt any hysteria, and then only because he thought he had killed a man.

The situation was different now. He had to meet alone the most notorious man killer of Nevada, not when he was strung up for action by the clash of a sudden encounter, but after a day and night of suspense in which his imagination would play him unkind tricks and show him ghastly visions. He saw pictures—horrible pictures in which Dutch

loomed up a huge ape-like superman towering over him as a prostrate victim. He saw himself playing the poltroon, dying, dead, every detail of the scene sharp as the lines of an etching. The little boy in him—the child that had for years been dormant—crept out and wailed with fear. Yet all the time he wore a wooden face that told no tales to curious men who watched him.

When at last he was alone Hugh did the wisest thing possible. He borrowed a page instinctively from twentieth-century psychology not then in vogue. He faced the fact that he was afraid, dragged his fears out into the open, examined them, and jeered at them.

"What's ailin' you, Hugh McClintock?" he demanded of himself. "Ain't you got any sand in yore craw a-tall? Who's Sam Dutch, anyhow? What if he has got a dozen men? Didn't he kill half of them when they weren't lookin' for trouble? Didn't he pick on four flushers who wouldn't stand the gaff? Say he is big as all outdoors. Easier to hit, ain't he? What do you care if he's a wild man from Borneo and chews glass, like he claims? All men are the same size when they get behind a Colt gun."

He oiled his revolver while he fought out his fears aloud. "Whyfor should Sam Dutch hang the Indian sign on you? He's the same scalawag they had to carry feet first outa the Crystal Palace after

you got through with him. He's the same false alarm Scot ran outa Virginia not so long ago. He should do the frettin', not you."

With the thought of Scot, courage flowed back into his heart. He knew that somehow Scot would in his place face this fellow down or blot him from the map. "Trouble with you is you're scared, Hugh. But you're goin' through, ain't you? Sure. You got to. Then buck up an' throw the scare into the other fellow."

His mind stuck to that last thought. What were his brains for if he could not make them more useful than the craft and brutishness of Sam Dutch? His mind began to work out a practical plan of action. When he arose from the bench where he sat cleaning the revolver his eyes were bright and shining. The fear in him, which had for hours been lying like a heavy weight on his subconscious mind, no longer repressed but frankly admitted and examined, had now vanished into thin air.

As soon as it was dark Hugh slipped out of his shack and crept along the side of the gulch toward Main Street. He stopped behind a cabin of whip-sawed lumber and edged forward to the back of it. The hut had one room. Except the front door there was no way of entrance but by one of the two windows. Hugh had no intention of entering. He was satisfied that Dutch would not come home till late. Probably he would bring a companion

with him as a protection against the chance of being ambushed.

For five minutes Hugh worked at one window, then gave his attention to the other. After this he stole back to the edge of the gulch and busied himself among the branches of a little scrub tree which stood at the point of intersection between a small gorge and the main gulch.

Hugh's guess had been a good one. It was close to one o'clock in the morning when Dutch returned to his cabin. With him was a companion whom Hugh, lying huddled in the sage close to the cañon's rising slope, recognized as William Buckley, one of Sam's boon toadies.

The man killer took no chances, at least no more than were necessary. It was quite on the cards, as he understood the business of murder, that his foe might lie in wait for him and shoot from ambush. He did not come down the road, but by way of an alley that brought him to the rear of his shanty. Quickly and stealthily the two men dodged inside. Once in, Dutch bolted the door and pulled the window blinds. Before going to bed he moved both cots so as to put them out of range of one who might crawl up to either window and take a wild shot at the place where one of the beds had been.

Dutch was slipping out of his long army coat when there came a gentle tap—tap—tap at one of the windows. The big bulk of a man stood crouched,

eyes glaring, head thrust forward, every sense alert to meet the danger which threatened. He slid out of the coat and dragged a revolver from his hip.

Again there came a slow tap—tap—tap, this time on the opposite window. With incredible swiftness Dutch whirled and fired. His gun was still smoking when the tap—tap—tap, clear and measured, sounded a second time at the first window. Straight at the sound the killer flung another shot. He rushed to the window and drew back the sack used for a curtain. There was nobody at the window either alive or dead, nor was it possible for anybody to have slipped away in that second between the sound of the tapping and the moment when Dutch had torn aside the sack.

As he stood there, frightened and bewildered, there came a sound that turned his flesh to goose-quills. Down the wind was borne a sobbing scream like the wail of a lost soul. Dutch knew that no human voice had uttered that cry. It rose and fell, died down, broke out again, weird and unearthly as a banshee's whimper.

Tiny beads of perspiration stood out on the man's forehead. His hands shook. He had no thought but that his call from the world beyond had come, and with the blood of a dozen men on his atrophied conscience he yielded to the rising tide of terror in him.

The slow tap—tap—tap sounded a third time on the window.

The gun-fighter trembled. "Goddlemighty, Bill, I—I done got my call."

Buckley felt none too comfortable himself, but he managed a laugh. "Sho, Sam! Nothin' but the wind."

"The wind can't tap on the window for me, can it? It can't——"

The sentence died out, for a second time the ululation of that sobbing shriek came faintly.

Dutch collapsed on a cot, covering his ears with his hands. The man was of a low order of intelligence, as full of superstition as a plantation Negro. His mind did not even seek for a rational explanation of the phenomena that startled him. He was a coward of conscience. The clock was striking twelve o'clock for him. He accepted that without debate.

With an uneasy glance at the window Buckley offered such sorry comfort as he could. "The wind plays damn queer tricks, Sam. You buck up an' get a bottle out. We'll play seven up for a spell."

A high mocking laugh, thin and sinister, trembled out of the night as though in answer to Buckley's suggestion. The two men looked at each other. Each read fear in the eyes facing his.

"It—that sounded like—like Al Morford the day I shot him," gasped Dutch, clutching at his companion's sleeve. "He—he was laughin' at me when I drew on him and asked him where he'd have it."

"You don't want to get to thinkin' about that now, Sam," advised Buckley, moistening his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. "Let's hit the grit back to the Glory Hole. We'll feel better once we get outside of a few drinks."

"He—said he'd come back an' ha'nt me," whispered the man killer abjectly. "Said it while they was takin' his boots off, right before he passed in his checks."

"Al Morford's been dead an' buried for years," said the other man shakily. "Forget him. An' le's get outa here, sudden."

Another wail soughed down from the gorge. Dutch shook like an aspen. "I—I can't go out—there."

"You gonna stay here all night? I ain't." Buckley mopped the sweat from his forehead and drew a revolver. He trod softly to the door, then turned to his companion. "Come on, Sam."

Buckley had no mind to take the night walk alone, nor had Dutch the courage to stay without his ally. The big ruffian, his nerves a-quiver, crept after the other man.

They slipped from the cabin toward the road.

A gust of wind swept the gulch, bringing with it a menacing jangle of horrible laughter. The fugitives threw away the remnant of their pride and stumbled through the sagebrush at a run. Their hearts were in their throats. When they looked back it was with the expectation of seeing hobgoblins burst from the chaparral in pursuit.

Presently Hugh McClintock stole up to the cabin and removed a tick-tack from each of the shattered windows. He cut down from the scrub pine at the mouth of the gorge a kind of æolian harp he had made out of violin strings and a soap box. The wind, whistling through this, had given out the weird wail which had shaken the nerves of Dutch. The falsetto laughter had been an histrionic effort of Hugh's own vocal cords. It happened that just now his voice was changing.

The youngster went home to bed and to sleep. Meanwhile Dutch, to restore his weakened self-esteem and courage, drank heavily through the night.

In the morning Hugh made his few preparations. He wrote a letter to his father and another to Scot. He ate a good breakfast. He examined carefully his revolver and a sawed-off shotgun loaded with slugs.

By way of back alleys he reached the Glory Hole and slipped through the back entrance to a small table in the darkest corner of the saloon. Except for the bartender Hugh was almost alone in the place.

Two men, their feet on the rail, were discussing the bonanza in Last Chance Hill. They were comparing the merits of the Real Del Monte and the Wide West, both of which mines were producing very rich ore. Occasionally somebody else drifted in and out again.

The bartender looked curiously at the young fellow with the sawed-off shotgun on the table in front of him. He was a little puzzled to know what to do. He did not want to intrude in anybody's private affairs, but he did not want any trouble in the Glory Hole. Perhaps this youngster was going hunting and had agreed to meet someone here.

The attendant drifted that way on pretense of wiping a table with a towel.

"Serve you anything?" he asked casually.

"No, thanks."

"Waitin' for someone?"

"Yes."

"Can I take care of the gun till yore friend gets here?"

"Thanks. It's no trouble."

"Live here?"

"Yes. Wood contract for the Real Del Monte."

The young stranger's manner was so matter of fact that the bartender's suspicions, not very strong, were lulled to rest. It was not likely, anyhow, that this boy with the golden down on his cheeks could be looking for trouble.

There came an irruption of patrons and the man with the apron became busy. Then another group swept into the place. There were five of them. In the van was Dutch. Hugh recognized Buckley, Daily, and Three-Fingered Jack. They took noisily a table close to the one where Hugh sat.

Daily, about to sit down, gripped the back of his chair hard and stared at the man behind the sawed-off shotgun. He did not take his seat. Instead, out of one corner of his mouth, he dropped a word of warning to Dutch. Then, as though moved by a careless impulse to speak to the bartender, he sauntered to the front of the room.

Dutch slewed round his head and looked at Hugh. Neither of them spoke a word. The killer was not drunk. He was in that depressed state of mind which follows heavy drinking after the stimulus has died down. One glance was enough to make clear to him his carelessness. By the crook of a finger his foe could fill him full of buckshot.

The ticking of a clock behind the bar was the only sound in the room. The gun-fighters with Dutch dared not rise to slip out of the line of fire for fear McClintock might misunderstand the movement and blaze away.

Hugh broke the silence. "If any of you gentlemen have business elsewhere Mr. Dutch and I will excuse you."

All of them, it appeared, had matters needing

their attention. They moved swiftly and without delay.

Dutch begged for his life. His ugly face was a yellowish-green from fear. "I was jes' a-foolin', young fellow. I didn't aim to hurt you none. Only a li'l' joke. Ole Sam don't bear no grudge. Le's be friends."

The man with the shotgun said nothing. With the tip of his forefinger he tapped slowly three times on the wooden top of the table.

The bad man gave a low moan of terror. He had no thought but that he had come to the end of the passage. His brain was too paralyzed to permit him to try to draw his revolver. Nemesis was facing him.

"Hands on the table," ordered Hugh.

The big hands trembled up and fell there. Abjectly Dutch pleaded for the mercy he had never given another man. He would leave camp. He would go to Mexico. He would quit carrying a gun. Any terms demanded he would meet.

Hugh sat in a corner with his back to the wall. He was protected by his position from any attack except a frontal one, in case the companions of Dutch moved to come to his rescue. They had, in point of fact, no such intention. Though Dutch belonged to their gang, he had always been an obnoxious bully. He was a quarrelsome, venomous fellow, and more than once had knifed or shot those of his own crowd.

Nobody liked him, least of all those who had accepted him as leader.

Three-Fingered Jack leaned back with his elbows hitched on the bar and grinned cynically as he listened to the whining of the huge ruffian.

"He claims to be a man-eater, Sam does," he whispered to Daily. "Calls himself Chief of Main Street. Fine. We'll let him play his own hand. He sure wouldn't want us interferin' against a kid. All night I've listened to his brags about what all he'd do to this McClintock guy. Now I'm waitin' to see him do it."

"What's eatin' the kid?" demanded Daily, also in a whisper. "Why don't he plug loose with the fireworks? You can't monkey with Sam. First thing he knows he won't know a thing, that kid won't. He'll be a sure enough corpus delinqui."

But Hugh took no chances He knew what he was waiting for. Thirty minutes by the watch he held the desperado prisoner. When Dutch got restless he tapped the table three times with his finger tip, and the man began to sweat fear again. The big bully never knew at what moment the boy might crook his finger.

"You're goin' on a journey," Hugh explained at last. "You're takin' the stage outa town. The Candelabria one is the first that leaves. So you're booked for a seat in it. And you're not buyin' a return trip ticket. Understand?"

Dutch understood humbly and gratefully. His gratitude was not to this fool of a boy whom he meant to destroy some day, but to the luck which was bringing him alive out of the tightest hole he had ever been in.

Under orders from Hugh the bartender disarmed Dutch. Still covered by the shotgun, the sullen dethroned chief climbed into the stage that was about to leave.

From a saloon farther down the street a Negro's mellow voice was lifted in song:

> "Ole Dan and I, we did fall out,
> An' what you t'ink it was about?
> He tread on my corn an' I kick him on de shin,
> An' dat's de way dis row begin.
>
> So git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
> Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
> Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
> You're too late to come to supper."

A crowd had gathered on the street. It watched with eagerness the taming of this bad man. In the old fighting West nobody was more despised than a cowed "man-eater." The good citizen who went about his business and made no pretensions held the respect of the community. Not so the gunman whose bluff had been called.

On the outskirts of the crowd a quiet man—he was Captain J. A. Palmer and he had nerves of steel—

took up the chorus of the song derisively. Others began to hum it, at first timidly, then more boldly:

"Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker,
You're too late to come to supper."

Before the last verse the song was going with a whoop. Nearly everybody present had sidestepped Dutch. Many had gone in fear of his vicious, erratic temper. It was a great relief to see him humiliated and driven away.

Dutch looked neither to the right nor to the left. He sat hunched in his seat, head down and teeth clenched. At any moment the demonstration might turn into a lynching bee now that Aurora had lost its fear of him.

The stage rolled away in a cloud of dust.

Hugh turned, to find himself facing Captain Palmer.

"Don't you know better than to let Sam Dutch get away alive after you've got the drop on him?" Palmer asked.

"I couldn't kill him in cold blood."

"Hmp! He'd have killed you that way, wouldn't he?"

"Yes. But I'm no murderer."

Palmer looked the youth over with a new respect. "Shoot straight?"

"I'm a pretty good shot."

"Kill if you had to?"

"Yes."

"Young fellow, I want you. What you doing now?"

"Wood contract."

"Finish it. Then come see me. We want a shotgun messenger to ride with the stage. Gotto stop these hold-ups. Big pay and little work."

Hugh smiled. "Guaranteed as a nice safe job, is it?"

"Safe as running Sam Dutch out of town," Palmer answered, meeting the smile with another.

Young McClintock shook his head. "Got another job waiting—one with Uncle Sam."

"Going to join the army?"

"Yes."

The Captain nodded. "Good enough. Your country has first call. Go to it, boy."

CHAPTER XIII

THE "STRANGLERS"

A LETTER from Scot delayed Hugh for a time from carrying out his intention of joining the army. The older brother wrote that he had been offered a commission and was anxious to get to the front, but that certain matters were just now keeping him in town. He did not mention that he was waiting till Mollie closed out her little business and moved to Carson, where she would be free of her husband's interference.

The news that his brother was going into the army gave the boy a thrill. He had given his ardent hero worship to Scot. He felt, as many others did, too, that there were thwarted qualities of leadership in Scot that might yet make of him a Broderick. Between him and a big future there was no obstacle but the wilful wildness of the man. He had everything that made for success except stability of purpose.

What a soldier he would be. What an officer under whom to serve! Scot would make an ideal cavalry chief. Young McClintock wrote back at

once that he would join his brother whenever he was ready to leave. He wanted, if possible, to serve in his company.

The departure of Sam Dutch from Aurora did not put an end to lawlessness there, though it undoubtedly heartened the good people and prepared the way for the drastic law-and-order programme which followed.

The Last Chance mines were producing amazingly. There seemed no end to the riches in sight. Money was easy, and the rough element flocked to the town from California and the other Nevada camps. The Sacramento and San Francisco gangs ran wild and killed and maimed each other at will, but so long as they let good citizens alone for the most part, no efficient check was put upon them. The town went its busy, turbulent, happy-go-lucky way. It sunk shafts, built business blocks, established a company of home guards known as the Esmeralda Rangers, and in general made preparations for a continued prosperity that was never to end. Two daily newspapers supplied the eight thousand inhabitants with the news of the world as it came in over the wire.

The ebb and flow of the tide of battle from the great centres where the armies of Lee, Meade, Grant, Buell, and Bragg struggled reached this far-off frontier and drew a line of cleavage between the fiery Southerners and the steadfast Northerners who made up the population. Nevada had been made a

territory and the fight was on for statehood. President Lincoln backed the party which demanded admission. The reasons were both political and financial. Later, Abraham Lincoln said that Nevada, through the treasures of gold and silver which it poured to the national capital, had been worth a million men to the Union cause.

His wood contract finished, Hugh took temporarily a place with the express company as shotgun messenger. The job was a very dangerous one. Hold-ups were frequent, and the messenger did not get or expect an even break. In the narrow twisting cañons below the town it was easy to lie in ambush and surprise the stage as it carried bullion from the mines.

Hugh was lucky. His stage was "stuck up" once, but it chanced that no bullion was on board. On another occasion he was wounded in an attempt at robbery and left one of the bandits lying in the road with a load of buckshot in him. His own wound was slight. People began to say that he bore a charmed life. The boy's reputation for gameness was growing.

Bob Howland, a nephew of the territorial governor, Nye, was city marshal. He asked young McClintock to be his deputy.

"We're going to clean up this town and I need help. You'll sure have a merry time."

Hugh declined. "No, I'm going into the army right away, soon as I hear from Scot. I'll stick with the stage till then."

Hugh had occasion next day to go into the Glory Hole to speak with a man. He saw Bob Howland talking to the girl dealing faro. The marshal walked across the floor and joined McClintock.

He was smiling. "Come outside," he said quietly.

They strolled out together. "Jimmy Sayres was killed this morning by Johnny Rogers," Howland explained. "You know Rogers is working for Johnson on his ranch at Smith's Valley. Jimmy and a couple of other bummers were passing through Wellington Station and picked up a good saddle horse belonging to Johnson. Johnny buckled on his Colt's navy and hit the trail after them. Seems he caught up with them near Sweetwater Station. They fired at him. He got busy right then, and Sayres quit taking any interest in the proceedings. The other two thieves broke for the willows. Johnny took the horse back with him. Good work, I say."

"Sayres is one of the San Francisco gang. Isn't that likely to make trouble? The gang will be out for revenge."

"Captain Palmer has served notice on them to lay off Johnny Rogers. If they don't we'll organize a branch of the vigilantes, as they did at Virginia not long since."

"Then it's a showdown?"

"It's a showdown."

It was observable that the gang began to draw

together from that day. Minor differences of opinion in its members were sunk in the common need of a united front. Daily, Masterson, Buckley, Vance, McDowell, Carberry, and their followers could be seen swaggering in groups. Their attitude was defiant. It would not have surprised Aurora to learn any morning that Palmer or Rogers had been shot down.

The vengeance of the gunmen fell instead on Johnson, the rancher who had sent Rogers to get back the stolen horse. He was warned not to show his face in Aurora. The ranchman disregarded the threat and came to town each week to sell his produce. He made the trip once too often. His body was found one morning lying in the street. During the night he had been murdered.

Hugh was standing in front of the Novacovich building when he heard of the killing. The man who told him whispered a word in his ear. Instantly the express messenger walked to his cabin. He drew out a sawed-off shotgun from beneath the bed and passed down Main Street to the Wingate building.

Already forty or fifty men were present, the pick of the town. More were pouring in every minute. Captain Palmer was the leader. As Hugh looked from his cold stern face to those of the grim men about him he knew that a day of judgment had come.

An organization of vigilantes was completed in a few minutes. There was no debate, no appeal from

the decision of the chair. These citizens meant business. They were present to get results swiftly and efficiently. The men were divided into companies with captains. One group was sent to take charge of the Armoury, where the weapons of the Esmeralda Rangers were kept.

Palmer checked off a list of gunmen to be arrested. This commission was given to Hugh. He divided his company into groups and set about finding the men whose names he had on the list.

Most of the desperadoes were taken completely by surprise. They were captured in bed after being aroused from sleep. Hugh himself broke down the door of Jack Daily's room after the man had refused to open it.

The two faced each with a revolver in his hand. Daily saw other men at the head of the stairs back of McClintock.

"What's all this row about?" he asked.

"W. R. Johnson was killed in the night. You're wanted, Jack," the young man answered.

"Killed, was he? Well, he had it comin'," jeered the gunman. "You've heard about the pitcher that went once too often to the well, I reckon."

"We've heard about that pitcher, Jack. Have you?" asked Hugh significantly.

Daily tried to carry things off with a swagger. "Been elected sheriff overnight, young fellow, in place of Francis?"

"Just a deputy. Drop that gun."

The desperado hesitated. Then, with a forced laugh, he tossed his revolver upon the bed. "You're feelin' yore oats since Dutch showed a yellow streak, McClintock."

Buckley had escaped and the sheriff sent a posse after him. Two or three men on the list were in hiding and could not at once be found, but the gather in the net of the vigilantes was a large one. Later in the day Buckley was brought to town. He had been found skulking in a prospect hole.

There was a disposition at first on the part of some to let the machinery of the law take its course rather than try the prisoners before a people's court. The leaders of the movement yielded to this sentiment so far as to allow a preliminary hearing in the office of Justice Moore.

At this hearing Vance, one of the gang whose name somehow had not been included on the list, had the hardihood to appear. He blustered and bullied, though he was warned to remain silent. Presently, just as he was reaching for a revolver, one of the citizens' posse wounded him in the arm.

Captain Palmer, on behalf of the vigilantes, at once brushed aside the formalities of the law and organized a people's court. He did not intend to let the guilty men intimidate the court that was to try them, nor to permit them to escape by means of technicalities.

About a dozen men were tried. They were brought before the court and examined separately. The evidence showed conclusively that Daily, Buckley, Masterson, and McDonald had murdered Johnson. The four were convicted and sentenced to be hanged as soon as the carpenters could build a gallows. Carberry, known as "Irish Tom," escaped the extreme penalty by one vote. That deciding vote was cast by Hugh McClintock. Carberry and his companions, shaky at the knees and with big lumps in their throats, were dizzy with joy at the sentence of banishment passed upon them. They would have emigrated to Timbuctoo to escape "the stranglers," as they called the vigilantes.

Someone—perhaps the sheriff, perhaps some friend of the condemned men—wired Governor Nye for help to save the gunmen. The Governor sent a telegram to his nephew. The wire read:

It is reported here that Aurora is in the hands of a mob. Do you need any assistance?

Bob Howland sent a prompt message back. It read:

Everything quiet here. Four men will be hanged in fifteen minutes.

The gallows had been built on the summit of the hill in the centre of North Silver Street. There, before the people whose laws they had mocked for so long, the four killers paid the penalty of their crimes.

Young McClintock, in charge of the company which guarded the gallows, was bloodless to the lips. He felt faint and greatly distressed. There was something horrible to him in this blotting out from life of men who had no chance to make a fight for existence. If a word of his could have saved them he would have said it instantly. But in his heart he knew the sentence was just. It meant the triumph of law and order against violence. Killers and gunmen would no longer dominate the camp and hold it in bondage to fear. Honest citizens could go about their daily business in security.

CHAPTER XIV

COLONEL McCLINTOCK AGREES WITH VICKY

THE pink of apple blossoms was in Mollie's cheeks, the flutter of a covey of quails in her blood. At the least noise her startled heart jumped. Sometimes it sang with a leaping joy beyond control. Again it was drenched with a chill dread. The Confederacy had made its last grand gesture at Appomattox. A million men and more were homeward bound. Scot McClintock had written that to-day, on his way back to Virginia City from the front, he would stop off at Carson for a few hours.

She was afraid to meet him. In the hour when they had talked over their decision she had begged him never to see her again, to put her out of his mind as though he had never met her. The fear lurked in the hinterland of her mind that perhaps he had done this. He had been a soldier, busy with the work given him to do, rising step by step by the force of his personality. Was it likely he still cherished the wild love, fruition of which had been denied them?

Mollie had always pushed far back into her secret

consciousness the sweet memories of Scot that had persisted. It had been a matter of duty. Her code bound her to the view that she could not be the wife of one man, though in name only, and at the same time love another even in the secret recesses of her soul. Yet it was never hidden from her that she loved Scot. No power within her could change that. All she could do was to flog herself because of it.

And to-day he was coming back, covered with honour and glory. Was she going to meet a stranger or the ardent friend who had brought colour into her life?

Into the house burst a girl, shining in the radiance and clean strength of her young teens. She was slim and straight and dark, and in her eager face glowed a wonderful colour that came and went as the flame of her emotions quickened or died. With a whirlwind rush of her supple body she launched herself on her sister.

"Oh, Mollie—Mollie darling," she cried. "It's been the *longest* time since I saw you. What made you stay so long up in Virginia? And who did you see there? Tell me all about *everything*."

A soft flame beat into the older sister's cheeks. Victoria's enthusiasm was always a tonic for her.

"I've had a letter from—from Colonel McClintock," she said. "He expects to pass through Carson this morning."

Vicky hugged her again. "Oh, goody, goody! Three *whacking* cheers for our colonel." It was characteristic of her speech that stressed words stood out like telegraph poles on a railroad track.

"He's not our colonel," reproved Mollie gently.

"He's mine," answered Vicky. "Isn't he my guardian? And doesn't he send me the *best* present every Christmas? He likes you, too. Think I don't know, Sis?"

Mollie's startled eyes fastened to those of Vicky. She was always being surprised by the acute observation of this helter-skelter youngster. Of course she couldn't know, but——

"Why don't you marry him, now you've got a divorce?" the child rushed on with the ruthless innocence of her age.

The colour poured into Mollie's cheeks. "How you talk!" she gasped. "About things you know nothing about. He—Colonel McClintock—has been a good friend to us. You mustn't get foolish notions."

"They're *not* foolish." She had Mollie in her arms once more. "Why don't you marry him, dearest? I would. I'd snap him up. 'N him a hero—decorated for bravery, like the *Enterprise* said."

Mollie's eyes fell. "You mustn't talk that way," she breathed tremulously. "You're only a girl, and you don't know anything about it."

"But I just do," triumphed Vicky. "You think

you'd stand in his way or *somep'n* now he's a big officer. Or you think——"

"I think your imagination is too active, dear," Mollie countered drily. "You haven't the least reason to think there is anything but friendship between me and Colonel McClintock."

Vicky caught her by the shoulders. "Sister Mollie, can you tell me, honest Injun, that you don't love him?"

The gaze of Mollie wavered before the steady searching eyes of inexorable youth.

"Or that he doesn't care for you?" Vicky went on.

There was a mist of tears in Mollie's eyes. "How do I know? I haven't seen him for years. Maybe he doesn't—any longer——"

The girl protested vigorously. "Don't you know him better'n that? Of *course* he does. You'll see."

The pent-up secret of Mollie's heart came out tremulously. "I sent him away. I told him to forget me. Men don't remember always—like we women do."

Vicky took active charge of the campaign. "I'll tell you what, Sister Mollie. You put on that blueprint dress, the one with the flowered pattern—an' lemme fix your hair—an' when you see him forget every single thing except how glad you are to see him."

Light-footed and swift, Vicky moved about the room making ready for the transformation of her

sister. She was a girl given at times to silences, but just now she was voluble as a magpie. Her purpose was to divert Mollie's thoughts from herself for the present.

After the flowered dress had been donned and the soft thick hair arranged to Vicky's satisfaction, that young lady stood back and clapped her hands. "Come into the parlour and look at the sweetest and prettiest thing in Carson," she cried, catching her sister's hand and dragging her forward. "If Colonel McClintock doesn't think you're *just dear*, it'll be because he's gone blind."

Mollie took one look in the glass, then caught at the sideboard to steady herself. For a voice from the doorway answered Vicky's prophecy.

"He does think so, just as he always has."

Scot came across the room in three long strides and swept Mollie into his arms. The breath of life flooded her cheeks and flung out a flag of joy. Her soldier had come home from the wars. He still wanted her.

"You've heard," she cried.

"That the courts have freed you. Of course."

Mollie wept happy tears through which smiles struggled. Vicky, dominated by a sense of delicacy, regretfully withdrew and left them to talk the murmurous disjointed language of lovers that has come down from Adam and Eve in the garden. Fifteen

minutes later she poked her head back into the room and coughed discreetly.

"Vicky, when can you have my girl ready?" Scot demanded.

"Ready for what?" she asked.

But she knew for what. Her face sparkled. The slim body wriggled with excitement, as a happy, expectant puppy does.

"For the wedding, of course."

"In twenty minutes," answered Vicky promptly.

"Good. I met Father Marston at the Ormsby House when the stage came in. I'll be back in time."

Mollie protested, blushing. She had no clothes. She did not think she wanted to be married in such a hurry. Proper arrangements must be made. Vicky and Scot brushed her excuses aside peremptorily.

In his blue uniform McClintock strode down the street, the sword still swinging at his side. He knew where to find Father Marston, who was chaplain of the legislature, now in special session.

Delavan Marston was a character. Rough and rugged, he struck straight from the shoulder. His tastes and habits were liberal. He liked a good cigar and a good glass of wine. Generally he was called Father Marston, though he was a Protestant.

He rose, tall and gaunt, to open the assembly with prayer, just as Scot came into the hall. The soldier

listened to a remarkable petition. A member of the legislature had been complaining because the chaplain's prayers were too long.

"And they don't get practical results," the member had added. "If they'd make the rock in my tunnel any softer or the water in my ditch more plentiful I'd favour 'em. But they look to me like a waste of time."

A kind friend had reported the grumbler's words to Marston. This morning he made his petition short enough and direct enough.

"O Lord," he prayed sonorously, "we ask Thee to remember in particular one of our number. Make the rock in his tunnel as soft as his head and the water in his ditch as plentiful as the whisky he daily drinks. Amen."

McClintock stopped the parson on his way out of the building.

Father Marston swept the handsome figure from head to foot with his grim eyes. He was very fond of Scot McClintock, but he disapproved of many of his actions. He was the only man alive except old Alexander McClintock who dared tell him so.

"Colonel, that uniform is an honour to any living man. They tell me you've not disgraced it in the army. That's right. I'd expect you to be a good soldier. But there are soldiers of peace, sir. They have their battles to fight, too. Isn't it about time you quit hellin' around and set this country round

here a good example? Folks like and admire you. The Lord knows why. They set a heap o' store by you. They'll be disappointed if you go back to dealing faro."

Scot gave him his frank disarming smile. "I'll not disappoint them in that particular way, Father. Hugh and I are going into business together as soon as he is discharged from the army. Tell you all about that later. Right now I want you to marry me."

"Who to?"

"To Mrs. Dodson."

"A divorced woman."

Scot met him eye to eye. "Yes, sir."

"I don't believe in divorces, Colonel."

"There are divorces and divorces, Father. Do you know anything about Robert Dodson and Mollie Dodson?"

"Know 'em both. She's a good woman. The less said about him the better, I reckon. Maybe she's entitled to a good husband. Looks thataway to me. I'll marry you. If it's a sin the Lord will have to charge it against me. When do you want to be married?"

"Now. Soon as I can get a license. Meet you at her house in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be there on time, sir."

Father Marston was waiting when Scot reached the house with the license.

Vicky came into the parlour, slim and straight as a half-grown boy. She drew her heels together and lifted a hand to her rebellious black hair. "Colonel, I have to report that the bride is ready."

To Vicky it seemed that all Mollie's troubles would now melt in the warm sunshine of happiness. She could not understand the reason for the tremulous mist of tears in her sister's soft eyes while she made the responses. After the ceremony she flung herself into Mollie's arms and kissed her rapturously.

"I always wanted a sure-enough prince for you, Mollie," she whispered. "And now you've got him. Don't you dare not to be happy now."

Mollie nodded, swallowing a lump in her throat. She did not know whether happiness was to be her portion or not. All she was sure of was that she could walk through life beside the man she loved. And that, just now, was all she asked.

CHAPTER XV

HUGH LEARNS OLD GRIMES IS STILL DEAD

FORTUNE picks her favourites strangely. While the McClintocks were away at the war Robert Dodson, incompetent and worthless, developed from a pauper to a millionaire. His was one of the sudden shifts of luck to which Virginia City was becoming used.

Most men in the camp had a trunkful of mining stock picked up here and there, a lot of it feet in wildcat concerns hawked about in exchange for meal tickets, boots, shirts, liquor, and other supplies. This was scattered so promiscuously that one could acquire reams of it without giving much in actual value for it. Dodson's rise to affluence was a camp joke. It was said that he sold two bags of bones and a pile of kindling for a million dollars. What he actually did was to swap his ramshackle wagon and starving team for fifty feet in the Never Say Die, twenty-five feet in the Gambler's Luck, twenty in the Mollie Macrae, and fifteen in the Road to China. He was given a quart of whisky to boot. The trade was made while Dodson was drunk, and all his saloon

cronies chuckled over the way he had been sold. For all of these were stock jobbing enterprises and nothing more. None of them were doing any developing at all.

A mine adjacent to the Never Say Die and the Gambler's Luck struck it rich. There was a sympathetic boom in mines of surrounding territory. The Never Say Die sank a shaft and ran a crosscut. This cut into a vein that appeared to be a bonanza. Half seas over again, Dodson sold out his interest in both prospects at the height of the boom. Within a week it was known that the crosscut had run into only a small pocket.

Luck pursued Dodson. It would not let him alone. He took a flyer in Ophir stock, and the Ophir soared. He invested in Crown Point and the Belcher. Both were big winners.

Presently a younger brother of the new magnate appeared on the scene to manage his interests. Ralph Dodson was a big athletic fellow with glossy black hair and small black moustache. The dark eyes were keen and cold. They roved a good deal, but it was noticeable that they came to pause whenever they fell on a good-looking woman. He had a hail-fellow-well-met manner, but there was something hard and icy in him that frustrated his jollity.

The younger brother had a powerful influence over Robert Dodson. The man pulled himself up and stopped drinking. He was of nature parsimonious,

and he hung on to his fortune in spite of the parasites who fawned on him. Ralph's cool business judgment was a factor in the rapid increase of it.

Scot McClintock returned to civil life to find that the wastrel and ne'er-do-well was an important figure in the community. He had the responsibilities that go with wealth, and these always entail a certain amount of public recognition. The bullet head of Robert Dodson might be seen among the notables at the International Hotel. His shifty yellow eyes looked down from the platform on various important occasions.

Both Scot and his brother had saved money. They had, too, a long credit at the banks and among private friends. They went into freighting on an extensive scale. They bought teams, increasing gradually the size of their business. Ore and wood contracts were their specialties.

Dan De Quille has said that the Comstock is the tomb of the forests of the Sierras. This is literally true. Already enough timber had been buried in the Lode to build a city several times as large as San Francisco was. The square-set system of timbering, invented by Philip Deidesheimer, made it possible to develop the mines to a great depth in spite of the tendency of the ground to cave. But this necessitated hauling timber from a distance. The nearer slopes of the range were already denuded.

Upon this need the McClintocks built their business. It prospered year by year, for both members of the firm were shrewd and energetic.

Vicky had remained at school in Carson when Scot moved to Virginia City. When she reached the age of sixteen Scot sent her to a young lady's seminary at San Francisco where she could have better advantages. For a year she remained in the city at the Golden Gate.

It chanced that Hugh had not seen Vicky since the day when she first set out for school at Carson years ago. Upon the occasions of her visits to Mollie's house he had been out of town on business. Once he had called at Miss Clapp's to see her, but Miss Victoria happened to be up King's Cañon gathering wild flowers.

"What's she look like now?" Hugh asked Scot when he heard the girl was returning from San Francisco. "Must be a right sizable little girl now, I reckon. Last time I was in Sacramento I sent her a nigger toll. Here's the letter she wrote me. I'd think they'd teach her to spell better."

Scot read the note.

DERE MISTER SANTA CLAWS,

I got the doll. Thank you very much for it. I like dolls. I am lerning speling, reading, riting, gography, numbers, grammar, and deportment. Deportment is when you say thanks to a kind gentelman for giveing you a doll. We had bluebery pie for dinner. Do you like bluebery pie? I do. Wel I must close for this time your greatful little friend VICTORIA LOWELL.

The older brother wiped a smile from his face as he looked at Hugh. The note was like the little vixen who had written it. She was having her fun with Hugh, who seemed to have forgotten that in the course of four years children of Vicky's sex have a habit of shooting up into young ladies. A black doll! Well, Hugh had brought it on himself. Scot did not intend to spoil sport. He told a part of the truth.

"She's a pretty good match for the black doll herself—the blackest little thing you ever saw. Hair flies wild. A good deal of long arms and legs about her. Some whirlwind when she gets started."

"Always was that," Hugh said. "I can imagine how she looks. Blueberry pie painted on her face when she wrote that letter probably." He shifted the conversation to business. "Are you going down to Piodie or do you want me to go?"

Piodie was the newest camp in Nevada. Discovery of ore had just been made and a stampede for the new diggings was on. They were said to be very rich in both gold and silver. If this proved true, the handling of freight to the new camp would be profitable.

"You go, Hugh. I don't want to leave Mollie just now."

In the mining country camps have their little day and cease to be. They wallow in prosperity and never dream of the time when the coyote will howl in their lonesome streets. A camp which "comes

back" is as rare as a pugilist who recovers a lost championship. Aurora's star had set. The live citizens were flitting, and the big mines were pulling their pumps. The name on every tongue was Piodie.

"All right," agreed Hugh. "I been wantin' to have a look at that camp."

"Take your time. No hurry. Look the ground over carefully. The business will run right along while you're away."

"Hope Mollie gets along fine," Hugh said awkwardly.

The young man was now a responsible member of a business firm which handled a large trade. The days when he had ridden pony express, even the ones when he had left the army with a sergeant's stripes on his sleeve, belonged to his adventurous past. Young as he was, Hugh served on civic committees and attended board of trade banquets. In his heart sometimes he rebelled. He did not look forward with eagerness to the day when he would be a leading citizen with an equatorial paunch. The blood of youth still sang in him a saga of untravelled trails.

Perhaps that was why he chose to ride to Piodie instead of taking a seat beside "Pony" King on the stage. It was a day of the gods as he rode up the Geiger Grade from B Street. His lungs drank in the rare air like wine. The sky was crystal clear except

for a long-drawn wisp of cloud above the summit of Mt. Davidson. Below him a cañon cleft the hills, and beyond its winding gorge was a glimpse of soft-toned desert through which ran a gleaming silver ribbon edged with the green of cottonwood foliage. Far away, at the horizon edge, were white mountain barriers, the Sierras to the right, the Humboldt and the Pine Nut ranges to the east.

It was noon when he reached Reno, the new town which had just changed its name from End-of-the-Track. The Central Pacific, built the previous year, had brought Reno into existence. It was still a little village. If any one had predicted then that the day was coming when both Carson and Virginia would be displaced in importance by the little railroad station Reno, he would have been judged a poor guesser.

Hugh jogged along at the steady road gait which is neither quite a trot nor a walk. The miles fell behind him hour after hour. The sun sank into the hills and left behind it a great splash of crimson glory. This faded to a soft violet, which in turn deepened to a lake of purple as the evening shadows lengthened.

The traveller camped in the sage. He scooped out a hole in the soft sand and built in it a fire of greasewood and brush. This he kept replenished till it was full of live coals. He knew it would last till

morning without fresh fuel. Supper finished, he rolled up in his blanket and found for a pillow the softest spot in the saddle.

His brain buzzed with thoughts of the old riding days when life had been an adventure and not a humdrum business. Into his memory there sang itself a chantey of the trail. He found himself now murmuring the words drowsily:

"Last night as I lay on the prairie,
And looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Would drift to that sweet by and by.
Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, little dogies, roll on, roll on,
Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, little dogies, roll on."

The tune of it followed in a rough way that of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." Stanza after stanza Hugh sang it softly, and each time as he came to the chorus his brain was a little less active, his eyes a little heavier.

"Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, little—dogies—roll—on."

He fell asleep with the words on his lips.

The gray of dawn was streaking the east when he awoke. After breakfast he fell again into the jog-trot of travel. The sage hills slipped behind him, and always there were others to replace the ones that

had vanished. The sun crept high and became a ball of fire in the sky. Dust in yellow clouds, fine and penetrating, sifted over and into him. His eyes became irritated with it and his throat caked.

It was late afternoon when he rode down through Piodie Cañon to the flats where enterprising real estate agents were laying out suburbs of the new camp. Hugh turned in at a feed corral and swung from the saddle stiffly.

A familiar voice lifted itself in tuneless but cheerful song:

"He lived at peace with all mankind,
In friendship he was true;
His coat had pocket holes behind,
His pantaloons were blue."

Hugh grinned. "The dawggoned old-timer. I ain't seen him since I quit ridin'," he said aloud to himself.

"But poor old Grimes is now at rest,
Nor fears misfortune's frown;
He had a double-breasted vest,
The stripes ran up and down,"

continued the singer from the stable.

McClintock tiptoed forward and looked in. A man of Falstaffian girth was oiling a set of harness.

"Ain't old man Grimes wore out them blue pants yet?" asked Hugh, dropping into the free-and-easy speech of his youth.

The fat man whirled. "Hell's hinges! If it

ain't Kid McClintock. Where did you drap from?" He fell on the young man and pounded him with his hamlike fists. "Say, I'll bet Byers'll be plumb tickled to see you."

"Byers here, too?"

"Sure as you're a foot high. That damn railroad done run us outa business. So we got this feed corral here. Didn't you see the sign: Pony Express Corral, Budd & Byers, Props?"

"You're sure some prop, Jim. Don't you reckon you're most a pillar? By jiminy, you been takin' on flesh since I saw you."

"Hmp! Nothin' of the kind," snorted Budd indignantly. "Shows what you know. I been losin' flesh, if you want the straight goods. Pillar, shucks! If you had enough education to outfit a Piute you'd sabe that 'Props.' is short for Proprietors. It means we own this here place."

Hugh registered intelligence. "Oh, I get you. Why, dad gum it, I'm a prop. my own se'f. Freighting and Contracting, McClintock & McClintock, Props."

"Yes, I done heard you been keepin' two jumps ahead of the wolf. I reckon that's why you come to a good town at last." Budd's body shook with mirth like an immense jelly. This was his idea of repartee as was repartee.

"*Is* it a good camp?" asked Hugh seriously. "That's what I came to find out."

"Kid, it's a sockdolager. Them hills is full of silver. All you got to do is to drive a pick in and find the ore."

"That's all you've got to do anywhere in these United States," agreed McClintock drily. "Question is, will you find it?"

Budd began to sputter with excitement. In the West it always has been the first article of a man's faith to believe in his town. One might have slandered the fat man's relatives and hoped to escape alive, but for Piodie he would have fought at the drop of a hat.

"Why—why—doggone yore hide, kid, this camp's got Virginia skinned four ways from Sunday. It's the best ever. Ore from the grass roots. Everywhere—all 'round. Millions o' tons of it." He waved a fat hand expansively as he warmed to his theme. "This here town is built in the heart of nature's storehouse, the mint where her auriferous deposits were planted when the Sierras was a hole in the ground. Son, you tie up to Piodie an' you'll sure do yorese'f proud."

In the midst of his oration a small wiry man stepped unobtrusively into the stable. Hugh deserted Budd to greet his partner.

Byers, always taciturn, broke a record and made a long speech. He said, "Glad to see you."

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE PIT OF NIGHT

HUGH strolled down Turkey Creek Avenue and lost himself in the crowd which filled the walks and jostled its overflow into the road. Piodie called itself a city, but it had as yet no street lights, no sewers, no waterworks, no graded roads, and no sidewalks other than a few whipsawed planks laid by private enterprise. It had, however, plenty of saloons, dance halls, and gambling houses. These advertised their wares to the world with a childlike candour, flinging shafts of light from windows and open doors upon the muddy lane between the rows of buildings.

The night was alive with the jubilant and raucous gaiety of a young mining camp. Pianos jingled and fiddles whined dance music to the accompaniment of shuffling feet. The caller's sing-song lifted above the drone of voices.

"Alemane left. Right hand to yore pardner an' grand right an' left. Swing yore pardners an' promenade you know where."

This was punctuated by loud and joyous whoops

from a dancer who had been imbibing not wisely but too well. Laughter, the rattle of chips, the clink of glasses, the hum of inaudible words, all contributed to the medley of sound rising into the starlit night.

McClintock weaved in and out, eyes and ears open to get a line on the town. It was a live camp. So much was apparent at a glance. But how much of this life was due to the money that had been brought here, how much of it to the ore which had been taken out of the Piodie mines. He met acquaintances, men he had known at Aurora and Virginia City. These introduced him to others. From them he heard fabulous stories of suddenly acquired wealth. Mike Holloway had bumped into a regular "glory hole" today that would make him a millionaire. The Standard Union was shipping ore assaying so much a ton that the amount had to be whispered. Compared to this town, Aurora, Dayton, Gold Hill, and Eureka were built on insignificant lodes. Hugh detected in much of this a note of exaggeration, but he knew that at bottom there was a large sediment of truth.

He went out again from the saloon where he had been gathering information and joined the floating population outside. In sex it was largely masculine. The feminine percentage was rouged and gaudily dressed.

Without any plan he drifted down Turkey Creek Avenue enjoying the raw, turbulent youth of the

place. Two men were standing in the shadow of an unlighted building as he passed. McClintock did not see them. One of the men pressed the other's arm with his hand to give a warning.

"That's Hugh McClintock," he whispered.

The second—a huge slouching figure with unkempt hair and beard—gave from his throat a guttural snarl. Simultaneously his hand slipped back toward his hip.

"Not right here, Dutch," the smaller man murmured. "If you want him get him from the alley as he's comin' back. You can do that an' make yore getaway back to Monument Street."

Hugh wandered to the end of the street, unaware of the lumbering figure that followed warily on the other side of the road. The street came to an end at a sheer hill rise. Here the young man stood for several minutes enjoying the quiet of the black night. Faintly the noise of Piodie's exuberance drifted on the light breeze. At this distance it was subdued to a harmony not unpleasant to the ear.

After a time he turned and walked slowly back toward the business section of town. He took his way leisurely. He had nothing to do but turn in at his lodging place, and the night was still young. Out in the open it was pleasanter than in a stuffy room, eight by eight.

The buildings had been put up in a haphazard fashion without much regard to the street frontage,

entirely as the fancy of the owners had dictated. Hugh came to one abutting on the alley. It was a storage warehouse, and it projected almost into the street. In the lee of it the young man stopped to light a cigarette.

Something whizzed past his ear and stuck quivering in the wooden wall. In the darkness streaks of fire flamed—one, two, three. The roar of the shots, pent in the alleyway, boomed like those of a howitzer. With one swift dive of his lithe body Hugh found cover behind a dry-goods box. In transit his revolver leaped to air.

But he did not fire. He lay, crouched close against the box, listening with taut nerves for any sound that might betray the position of his enemy.

None came. Presently he peered round the corner of the box. The darkness was Stygian. The blackness of the night was emphasized by the narrowness of the alley. Somewhere in that dark pit before him the ambusher lay, unless he had crept noiselessly away.

Protected by the box, Hugh might have crawled to the corner of the building, turned it, and so escaped. But he had no thought of doing this. He meant to find out if possible who this expert knife thrower was. If he had in town an enemy who hated him enough to lie in wait to do murder it was his business to discover who the man was. First, he wanted to get the ruffian lying thirty or forty feet

from him. Next, he meant to try to gain possession of the knife sticking in the wall.

The second hand of his watch ticked away the minutes. The large hand moved from the figures III to IV, crept on to V, passed the half-hour mark. Hugh did not know how long he lay there. His guess would have been hours. He began to think that the other man had made an escape.

On hands and knees, the barrel of his revolver clenched between his strong white teeth, McClintock crawled round the box, hugging the wall closely as he moved. His advance was noiseless, slow, so careful that it was punctuated with a dozen stops to listen. Someone was beating a drum down the street and the sound of it deadened any closer stir. He calculated that this was an advantage as well as a drawback. If he could not hear the other man, then it followed that the other man could not hear him.

Plank by plank he followed the wall, each motion forecast and executed so deliberately that it could not betray him. In the dense darkness he could see nothing, but he estimated he must be close to the knife in the wall.

He rose to his knees, still without a sound. His hand groped for the hilt of the bowie. It closed on—a thick hairy wrist.

"Goddamighty!" a startled voice screamed, and the wrist was jerked swiftly away.

Hugh's brain functioned instantly. The owner of

the knife, moved by the same desire as himself, had crept forward to recover it.

McClintock plunged, head down and arms wide. His full weight back of the drive, he crashed into the retreating enemy and flung him backward.

The marching years had developed Hugh. His stringiness was gone. He was a large man, tall and straight, with hard-packed muscles. No wildcat of the Sierras was more lithe and supple than he. But as he struggled with this ruffian, now on top, now underneath, their legs thrashing wildly as each tried to pin the other down, McClintock knew that the fellow with whom he grappled was bigger than he, thicker through the body, broader across the shoulders.

They whirled over and over. Thick thighs clamped themselves to Hugh's waist. Huge fingers closed on his throat. He threw up an arm, and at the same time a jagged bolt of pain shot through it. In the flesh of the biceps the blade of a bowie sheathed itself.

His breath shut off, the warm blood welling from his arm, Hugh gave a desperate heave of his body and flung the man astride of him forward and to the left. He spun round with pantherish swiftness and launched himself at the bulk of energy gathering itself for another attack.

They went down together, Hugh on top. His wounded arm pinned down the wrist with the knife.

The assassin felt for McClintock's eye socket with his thumb and gouged at it. The niceties of civilized warfare had no place in this conflict with a primordial brute. Dodging the thumb, Hugh found his mouth pressed against the forearm he held captive. The strong teeth that had been carrying the revolver until the two had come to grips closed on the tendons of the hairy arm. The man underneath gave a yell of pain. His fingers relaxed and opened. The handle of the bowie slipped away from them.

With his free arm the gunman tried to drag out a revolver. Hugh's fist, hard as knotted pine, drove savagely into the bearded face. It struck again and again, with the crushing force of a pile driver. Grunting with pain, the murderer covered up to escape punishment. He was lying cramped against the wall in such a way that he could not get at his six-shooter.

The man bellowed with rage and thrashed about to avoid that flailing fist. His boot heel found a purchase against the wall and he used it to pry himself out of the corner into which he had been flung.

The fighters rolled out from the building, for the moment free of each other. A flying boot struck Hugh in the forehead and dazed him. He scrambled to his feet. His foe was legging it down the alley with all the grace of a bear in a hurry to get away.

McClintock started to pursue, then changed his mind abruptly. The man was armed and he was

not. If he should run him down the ruffian would turn and murder him. At least he had written his John Hancock on the fellow's face and would know him again if he saw him soon.

The victor quartered over the ground. Presently he found his revolver and the bowie knife that had slashed his arm. He slid the revolver into its holster and the knife into his boot leg. From the alley he stepped back to the street.

The drum was still booming. He guessed that the affray had not taken more than five minutes from start to finish.

For the first time he became aware of a throbbing pain in his arm. When he pulled up his sleeve he saw that it was soggy with blood. The sight of the long jagged wound affected him oddly. He leaned against a hitching post for support, overcome by a faintness which surged over him.

He laughed grimly. "Blood beginnin' to scare you at this late date," he said to himself aloud. This brought him a touch of sardonic amusement. He had passed through three big pitched battles of the war, half-a-dozen skirmishes, and had been slightly wounded twice.

For first aid he tied a handkerchief around the wound as best he could, using his free hand and his teeth to make the knot. Ten minutes later he was in the office of a doctor.

"You're lucky," the doctor said. "Knife ploughed

along close to the surface. Didn't strike an artery. How'd you come to do it?"

"I didn't do it. The other fellow did. With this." Hugh pulled the bowie from his boot leg.

After he had dressed the wound the doctor examined the murderous-looking knife. He handed it back to Hugh with a dry comment.

"Did I say you were lucky? That's a weak word for it. You must carry the left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit caught in the dark of the moon. How did he come to leave that knife behind?"

"He didn't explain why. I kinda gathered he was in a hurry. Probably had an engagement down the street."

The doctor's keen eyes took in the strong grave face, the splendid figure, the imperturbable composure of the patient. It occurred to him that a Sierra grizzly would be no more dangerous than this man if he were aroused to action.

"Did you kill him?" he asked hesitantly.

"Not this time," McClintock answered quietly.

When he left, the doctor's gaze followed him out of the office. He wondered who this light-stepping Hermes could be. In his years of practice he had never met a finer specimen of humanity, judged on a physical basis of health, strength, and coördination of nerves and muscle.

CHAPTER XVII

A KNIFE WITH FOURTEEN NOTCHES

HUGH was feeding his horse next morning when a voice moved wheezily toward him as its owner passed through the stable into the corral.

> "Old Grimes is dead, that good old man,
> We ne'er shall see him more,"

Budd informed the world at large by way of announcing his arrival.

"When's the funeral, Jim?" asked McClintock. "I'll be there if it's soon. Like to be right sure he's buried. Don't mind pilin' a big flat rock on top o' that single-breasted coat my own se'f."

The fat man looked at him severely. "Young fella, I been hearin' about you. Met up with Doc Rogers. Says you got all cut up. How about it?"

"Doc Rogers ought to know."

"Was it serious?"

"I'd say it was serious. Cost me twenty-five dollars."

"Rogers ain't no two-bit man," Budd explained with pride. "Piodie is sure one high tariff town. Nothing cheap about it."

"Here's where he's gettin' ready to stick me on my feed bill," Hugh mentioned to his buckskin.

"Not on yore tintype. Yore money's no good at the Pony Express Corral, Kid."

"Much obliged to Budd & Byers, Props."

"Sho, we'll quit business when we can't feed a friend's bronc onct in a while. Say, was you much hurt, Kid? An' howcome it? Never knew you to go hellin' around askin' for trouble."

"No, an' you never will. I sure wasn't askin' for this."

Byers had joined them. He nodded silently to Hugh.

"Who did it?" asked Budd.

"Wish you'd tell *me* that, Jim. He didn't leave his name."

"What'd he look like?"

"He *felt* like a ton of bricks when he landed on me. I don' know how he looked. It was darker than the inside of Jonah's whale."

"Tell it to us," urged Budd.

Hugh told the story of the attack on him.

"An' you don't know who the scalawag was?" asked the fat man when he had finished.

"I don't *know*. I've got a guess—several of 'em."

"For instance?"

"Is Sam Dutch living here?"

"Yep. He's the handy man of the Dodsons—camp bouncer, killer, mine jumper, general all-round thug."

"The Dodsons are the big moguls here, seems to me from what I hear."

"They come clost to it—own the Standard Union and the Katie Brackett, have a controllin' interest in both stamp mills, run the stage line an' the Mammoth saloon."

"And the big store, Dodson & Dodson. They own that, I reckon."

"Yep, an' the building it's in. Fact is, they've got title to half the lots in town."

"They're a sweet pair."

"Sure are. Run the politics, too. The sheriff's their property. The job's worth twenty thousand a year, an' they elected him. Course he's good an' grateful. Why shouldn't he be?"

"So Dutch carries the Dodson brand, does he?"

"He does their dirty work."

"And his own, too."

"Sure."

"I've a notion Mr. Dutch has my autograph stamped on his face this glad mo'ning," drawled Hugh.

"Sorry to hear that. It'll mean trouble unless you leave."

"That's what he told me at Aurora," Hugh answered quietly.

"I heard about that. You've got his number. So has yore brother. Makes it worse. You'll get no even break from him. It'll be like last night. A shot outa the dark. Only next time he won't miss."

"I'm not sure it was Dutch. I was one of the vigilance committee at Aurora. We ran a bunch of thugs from town. Might be any one of that gang. Or someone may have took me for Scot. He has enemies, of course."

"An' you're the spittin' image of him, Kid. That last is one good guess."

"Whoever he was he left his card behind him." Hugh stooped and drew from his boot leg a bowie knife with a horn handle. Upon the lower part of the horn had been filed fourteen little notches. "This was the sticker he flung at me. He was in a hurry and didn't take it with him when he vamosed."

Byers examined the knife and spoke for the first time.

"Dutch claims fourteen."

"Well, I'm going to advertise it in the paper and give the owner a chance to reclaim his property," McClintock said grimly.

"Won't that be a call for a showdown?" Budd asked gravely.

"I aim to call for one. Then I'll know Mr. Pig

Sticker is sittin' on the other side of the table from me an' ain't pluggin' me in the back."

"If he stands for a showdown."

"If he stands for one. If he don't, well, I'll call his bluff that he's chief of Piodie, anyhow."

"You sure want to pack a good gun handy, then."

Byers nodded agreement. The simple direct way always suited him.

The fat man glanced at his partner before he changed the subject. "We had a talk yestiddy after you left, Kid, me'n Dan. We're locatin' a bunch of claims on Bald Knob. Looks to us like a good chance. The stampeders are all headed over Antelope Hill way, but there ain't no reason why there shouldn't be ore acrost the valley, too. Anyhow, we're gonna take a crack at it. A bird in the hand gathers no moss, as the old sayin' ain't. We had a notion to ask you to go in with us. Needs three to handle the thing, account of claim jumpers in case we make a strike. But I don't reckon now you'd want to stay here permanent."

"Why not?"

"This climate ain't suitable for you. Too many gunmen who don't like the colour of yore hair. I reckon there are seven or eight of them birds you helped run outa Aurora, let alone Dutch. Irish Tom is in our midst, as the old sayin' is, and Vance and that mule skinner Hopkins. It's a cinch they don't waste any time loving Kid McClintock."

"If you've got a proposition that looks good to me, you can forget the quick-on-the-trigger gang. I'm not the only Aurora vigilante in town. Last night I met several. The gunmen won't look for trouble on that account. We might start something again."

"We'll sure talk turkey if you feel that way. What say we ride up Bald Knob, an' if you like the lay of the land, we'll make our locations?"

"Suits me fine."

Few people can live in a new and prosperous mining camp without catching the contagion of the speculator. The magic word, whether it be gold, silver, or oil, sets the blood afire with the microbe of unrest. Just beyond reach of the hand lies a fortune. The opportunity of a lifetime is knocking at the door. All the spirit of adventure in one leaps to the risk. Sedate caution seems a dull-spirited jade at such a time.

Hugh was no exception to the rule. As he had passed to and fro among the miners in the saloons and gaming halls last night the stories to which he had listened quickened his blood.

He was ready for a hazard of new fortunes as soon as he could shake the dice.

CHAPTER XVIII

APPLY TO HUGH McCLINTOCK

HUGH dropped into the office of the Piodie *Banner* and paid for an advertisement in the paper and for two hundred and fifty posters set with display type.

The editor glanced over the copy. "I can get the bills out this afternoon. The ad will appear in the morning."

The sheet of paper handed in by McClintock bore no evidence of being loaded with dynamite. Upon it was printed roughly with a pencil this notice:

FOUND
In the Alley between Turkey Creek Avenue
And Monument Street
(At the Sacramento Storage Warehouse)
ONE BOWIE KNIFE WITH FOURTEEN NOTCHES
Owner Can Have Same By Claiming and Proving Title
To Property
Apply To Hugh McClintock

The owner of the printing plant looked the copy over a second time. "Course, I'm not here to turn

business away, Mr. McClintock, but—well, are the dodgers necessary? Wouldn't the ad in the paper be enough?"

"Maybe so. But I want to be sure the owner sees it. I reckon I'll take the bills, too," Hugh said easily.

He hired an old coloured man to tack up the bills on buildings, fences, and posts. To make sure that they were in conspicuous places Hugh went along himself. He also made arrangements with saloon keepers and gambling-house owners by which he was allowed to have the posters put on the walls of these resorts. His manner was so matter of fact that not one of his innocent accomplices suspected there was more behind the advertisement than appeared on the face of it.

"Fourteen notches. Looks like it might be Sam Dutch's bowie you found, stranger," one bartender suggested. "This camp sure howls, but I reckon it ain't got many fourteen notchers. Only one far as I know."

"If the knife belongs to Mr. Dutch he can have it by applying for it," Hugh said mildly.

"I expect he can have 'most anything he wants in this man's town if he sure enough asks for it," the man in the apron grinned.

In the middle of the afternoon, at which hour he first daily appeared to the world, Sam Dutch slouched down town with a story already prepared to account for his battered face. The tale he meant to tell

was that in the darkness he had fallen into a prospect hole and cut his cheeks, forehead, and lips on the sharp quartz he had struck.

On a telegraph pole near the end of Turkey Creek Avenue a poster caught his eye. He read it with mixed emotions. The predominating ones were rage, a fury of hate, and an undercurrent of apprehension. He tore the bill down and trampled it in the mud under his feet.

Half a minute later he saw a second bill, this time on the side of a store. This, too, he destroyed, with much explosive language. Between Rawhide Street and the Porphyry Lode saloon he ripped down three more notices of the finding of a bowie knife with fourteen notches. When he stopped at the bar and ordered a brandy sling the man was dangerous as a wounded grizzly.

The bartender chatted affably. He was in the habit of saying that he had not lost any quarrels with gunmen and he did not intend to find any.

"Fine glad day, Mr. Dutch. Nice change from Monday. Hotter'n hell or Yuma then, I say."

The bad man growled.

"I was sure enough spittin' cotton. Went up the gulch with T. B. Gill. Creek's dry as a cork leg. Good rain wouldn't hurt none," the young fellow went on.

"'Nother'fthesame," snarled Dutch, his voice thick with uncontrollable fury.

The bartender made a mental comment. "Sore's a toad on a hot rock this mo'ning." He tried another subject, with intent to conciliate. "Young fellow in a while back and wanted to hang up a bill. I said, 'Sure, hop to it.' Ain't lost any hog stickers myse'f, but maybe some other gent——"

Dutch glared round, found the bill with his eyes, and dragged out a navy revolver. Three bullets crashed through the poster and the wall back of it. The killer whirled and flung the fourth shot at the man behind the bar.

But that garrulous youth was fleeing wildly for safety. He had no intention whatever of being Number Fifteen. Between him and the back door was a table. He took it in his stride with all the ease of a champion hurdler. Down the alley he went like a tin-canned cur with a mob of small boys behind.

Inside of ten minutes Piodie knew that Sam Dutch was on the warpath again and that no man who did not want a permanent home on Boot Hill would be wise to mention posters or bowie knives to him. Piodie made a good many guesses as to the truth of the situation. Something had taken place that the town knew nothing about. The poster, Dutch's battered face, his rage, and the absence of his bowie knife from its accustomed sheath in the man's boot, all bore some relation to the mystery.

"Who is this Hugh McClintock, anyhow?" asked a

citizen newly arrived from Ohio. "Anybody know anything about him?"

Irish Tom Carberry grinned. He was at the post office getting his mail when the innocent question drifted to him. He looked at the stranger. "Sam Dutch knows him. So do I. We know him domn well."

He gave no further information, but after he had gone another former resident of Aurora whispered advice to the Ohioan. "Better not be so curious in public, friend."

"Why?"

"Because there's liable to be a killin' before night. Don't you see McClintock has served notice on Dutch that he can't be chief of Piodie while he's here? It's up to Sam to make good or shut up."

"All I asked was——"

"We done heard what you asked. It ain't etiquette in Nevada to ask questions unless you aim to take a hand in the play. You ain't declarin' yoreself in, are you?"

"Bet your boots I'm not. None of my business."

"You said something that time." The former Aurora man walked away.

The man from the Western Reserve looked after him resentfully. "This is the darndest place. I ask a question, and you'd think I'd made a break of some kind. Is there any harm in what I said? I leave it to any of you. Is there?" he asked querulously.

Jim Budd drew him aside and explained. "Hell's bells, man, don't be so inquisitive! I knew a fellow lived to be a hundred onct 'tendin' to his own business. But I'll tell you who Hugh McClintock is, since yore system is so loaded with why-fors and who-is-hes. The Kid's the man that ran Dutch outa the Esmeralda country. He's the man whose vote saved Irish Tom from being hanged when the stranglers got busy at Aurora. He's the shotgun messenger who bumped off Black Hank Perronoud when he held up the Carson stage. No gamer man ever threw leg over leather. I'd oughta know, for he rode pony express for me two years through the Indian country."

"Are he and Dutch going to fight?"

"Great jumpin' Jehosophat, how do I know?" rasped the fat man irritably. "I'm no tin god on wheels, an' I ain't no seventh son of a seventh son. If I was I'd go locate me a million-dollar mine *pronto.* You know the layout well as I do. Do yore own guessin', an' *do it private.*"

Dutch whispered a word in the ears of his satellites Vance and Hopkins later in the day. Those two gentlemen made together a tour of the town and tore down all the bills McClintock had tacked up.

CHAPTER XIX

McCLINTOCK BILLS THE TOWN

HUGH'S advertisement did not appear in the *Banner* next morning. The editor had killed it as soon as he learned that its purpose was to annoy Dutch. He knew several safer amusements than that. Young McClintock might enjoy flirting with death, but as the responsible head of a family the editor was in quite a different position.

To say that Hugh was enjoying himself is to stretch the truth. But experience had taught him that the bold course is sometimes the least hazardous. A line from a play he had seen at Piper's Opera House not long since flashed to his mind. "Out of this nettle danger, we pluck this flower safety." He would go through, if necessary, to a fighting finish. The chances were that his scorn of risk would lessen it.

Accompanied by his faithful coloured bill sticker, Hugh redecorated the town with posters.

Jim Budd came wheezing down Turkey Creek Avenue.

"You billin' the town for a circus, Kid?" he asked,

his fat paunch shaking. And when Hugh had stepped forward to him he added a warning in a lower voice: "Dutch is waitin' for you in front of Dodsons' store; least, it looks to me like he's aimin' to call yore hand."

"Any one with him?"

"Hopkins and Bob Dodson. I kinda figured they were lookout men for him. Say, you don't have to play a lone hand. I'd as lief sit in. Byers, too."

"No, Jim. My hand's stronger if I play it alone. Much obliged, just the same."

Budd conceded this as a matter of principle, but he was reluctant to do so in practice. "Well, don't you get careless, Kid. Dutch is sudden death with a gun. Sure is."

Opposite Dodson & Dodson's Emporium was the Mammoth Saloon.

"Tack one on the door, Uncle Ned," said Hugh.

McClintock spoke without looking at the bill sticker. He was watching three men standing in front of the store opposite. One of these hastily retreated inside. The two who remained were Dutch and Hopkins.

The killer growled a warning. "Lay off on that bill stickin'. It don't go here."

Hugh stepped across the street. He moved evenly and without haste. "Well, well, if it ain't Sam Dutch, chief of Virginia and Aurora, just as big as life and as handsome. Lemme see, you were

takin' the Candelabria stage last time I saw you." Smilingly the young man began to hum, "Git out de way, ole Dan Tucker." But the smile was of the lips only. His steely eyes held those of the big ruffian fast.

A snarling sound that might have been an oath fell from the ugly lips of the gun-fighter. His face reflected his slow thoughts. Should he strike now? He knew that a dozen men were waiting for the sound of a shot, that they expected him to kill McClintock on sight. Well, he would kill him all right—soon.

Without lifting his eyes for an instant from his enemy, Hugh gave the old Negro the order a second time: "Nail up the bill, Uncle. Mr. Dutch is joking. You *are* joking, aren't you?"

Dutch glared at Hugh furiously. He moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

From the left boot leg McClintock drew a bowie knife. The horn handle was marked in a peculiar way. Hugh had shown it to a dozen men, and most of them had recognized it. One of the pleasant habits of Dutch was to play with it threateningly before a fascinated circle of reluctant admirers. Now the young man held it up in his left hand.

"I'm tryin' to find an owner for this knife. Happen to know him, Mr. Dutch?" The straight, swift probe of the eyes was cold as iron, hard as hammered brass.

It was a call for a showdown. The men watching from the store windows, from the saloon opposite, from the blacksmith shop below, knew that a demand had been made on Dutch for a declaration of intentions. In the silence which followed, men suspended their breathing. The shadow of death hung low over the two tense figures standing out in relief.

Afterwards those present spoke of the contrast between the sullen sodden killer and the erect, soldierly athlete facing him. The guttural snarl, the great slouching apelike figure of the one suggested a throwback to prehistoric days. The clear expressive eyes, the unconscious grace and nobility of carriage, the quiet confidence of manner in the other were products of a new land flowering to manhood.

Men breathed again. Their hearts functioned normally once more. Dutch had chosen to dodge the challenge.

"I dunno as I know more about him than anybody else," he had growled.

Hugh did not relax the thrust of his eyes. "No? Thought maybe you did. I found it at the storage warehouse, corner of the alley, up the avenue. Didn't leave it there?"

Dutch did not answer at once. Inside, he surged with murderous impulse. He might beat this fellow McClintock to the draw. He had always boasted that he wanted no more than an even break with any man alive. Well, he had it here.

"Who says I left it there?" he demanded.

"I'm asking if you did."

The killer's right hand hung motionless. A weight paralyzed his will. These McClintocks had the Indian sign on him. Deep in him a voice whispered that if he accepted the challenge he was lost. Better wait and get this fellow right when he had no chance.

"No-o." To Dutch it seemed that the husky monosyllable was dragged out of him by some external force.

Tauntingly the cold voice jeered him. "Not you, then, that bushwhacked me in the alley and tried to shoot me in the back? Wouldn't do that, would you, Dutch? Got all yore fourteen on the level, of course."

"I aim to—to give every man a show," the gunman muttered.

"Good of you. Then it couldn't have been you that threw this knife at me and tried to gun me. It was dark. I couldn't make out his face, but I left the marks of my fist on it a-plenty."

Now that it seemed there was to be no gun play the watchers had come into the open. A battery of eyes focussed on the hammered face of Dutch. Cut lips, a black eye, purple weals on the forehead, and swollen cheeks told of recent punishment.

"I fell down a prospect hole," the bad man mentioned.

A bark of laughter, quickly smothered, met this explanation. Dutch glared round angrily.

"That prospect hole must have landed on you hard," Hugh told him grimly. "Take my advice. *Don't fall down any more.* Next time the shaft might shoot a hole through you."

"I ain't scared of you none. You can't run on me," Dutch growled sulkily, to save his face. "One o' these days I'm liable to get tired of you and feed you to the buzzards."

"Yes, I know you're chief here, same as you were at Virginia and Aurora. But just to show there's no hard feelings you'll help Uncle Ned tack up that poster, won't you?"

"No."

"Yes."

Again Dutch's sullen eyes battled and were beaten. "I don't have to," he flung out rebelliously.

"Not at all," Hugh mocked. "But out of good will you'll do it."

The ruffian shuffled across the road, snatched a bill from the old Negro, and with a hammer drove a tack through the middle of it.

Out of the Mammoth walked a big well-dressed man without a hat. He had black glossy hair and a small black moustache. In his manner and bearing was that dominance which comes to those who are successful. With a glance he took in the situation.

"Tear that bill down, Dutch," he said crisply.

The bad man looked at him, then at McClintock.

Hugh laughed. "You hear yore master's voice, Dutch."

Dutch ripped the bill down and tore it into a dozen pieces. Released from the mastery that had held him, he broke into savage furious oaths. At a word from the black-eyed man he would have fought it out with his enemy.

But Ralph Dodson did not speak the word. His frowning attention was fixed on Hugh.

"Mr. McClintock, the Mammoth is owned by me and my brother. If we want bills on the walls we'll put them there. Understand?" he demanded arrogantly.

Hugh bowed, almost as mockingly and as gracefully as Scot himself could have done it. "Quite. My fault, Mr. Dodson. I'll explain. This knife was sheathed two nights ago in my arm. A scoundrel waited for me in a dark alley and tried to murder me."

"Interesting, no doubt, but not my business," retorted Dodson curtly.

"So I'm puttin' up posters to find the owner of the knife."

"Not here. You can't put 'em up here."

"Not necessary. Everybody here knows who owns the knife—or rather who did own it. It's mine now, unless someone claims it. That all right with you, Dutch?"

The killer said nothing, but he said it with bloodshot, vindictive eyes—eyes in which hate and fear and cunning and the lust to kill struggled for victory.

Hugh turned on his heel and walked away, the sound of his footsteps sharp and ringing. Not once did he look back to see whether the murderer he had discredited would shoot him in the back.

Yet he was glad when he was out of range. Experiments in the psychology of a killer might easily be carried too far.

CHAPTER XX

"LITTLE VICKY"

JIM BUDD had a dozen reasons to offer why there must be gold in Bald Knob. Like many others, he was letting his hopes influence his judgment.

When he had finished his argument Hugh grinned. "May be here. May not. A fifty to one bet I'd call it, us on the short end. But that's mining. No can tell. Might as well stick up our notice here as anywhere. What say, Dan?"

Byers said, "Suits me."

"What about this fellow Singlefoot Bill who took up the claims originally—sure he's outa the country and won't make a kick?"

"Handed in his checks last year at Austin. Anyhow, he never did any assessment work here. You can see that. Just filed his location notice and let it go at that," Budd explained.

"Didn't he patent any of his claims?"

"I reckon. But not these. He couldn't have. There's not been enough work done on the ground. He jest scratched around."

"If he patented there would be a record of it, of course."

"I ain't so sure of that, either. The house where they used to keep the county papers burned down in the big fire a coupla years ago more or less."

"Well, the recorder would know."

"Oh, he died a month since. But we're in the clear. All you got to do is to use yore eyes to see this land couldn't a-been patented."

Hugh used his eyes and they corroborated his friend's opinion.

The partner surveyed roughly the claims they decided on, drove in corner stakes, and put up their announcements of ownership. Four locations were taken in partnership. Each of them filed on several individual claims. Hugh took one in his brother's name, the rest in his own. One of these last was to be held in trust for Vicky until she became of age. It was a custom of the country to take up mining prospects for friends.

Hugh wrote the notice for the partners. It read:

> We, the undersigned, claim four claims of 300 feet each in this silver and gold bearing quartz lead, or lode, extending north and south from this notice, with all its dips, spurs, angles, and variations, together with 50 feet of ground on either side for working the same.

Each of the three signed the paper.

Similar location notices were posted on the individual claims.

Hugh took charge of operations. He hired men, bought tools and supplies, selected the spot for the shaft, and himself tossed out the first shovel of dirt. When operations were under way he turned the management over to his partners and returned to Virginia City.

The business of the firm called him. Incidentally, he wanted to see his week-old nephew, Alexander Hugh McClintock.

He went directly to his brother's house on A Street. At his knock the door was opened by a young woman. She was dark and slender, and at sight of him her eyes flashed.

"You're Mr. Hugh McClintock," she cried.

"Yes. You're the nurse, I suppose. How is Mollie?"

The face of the young woman held surprises. Mischief bubbled over it for a moment. "Yes, I'm the nurse. Would you like to see—Mrs. McClintock?"

"If I may."

The nurse led the way into the house. Presently, after disappearing for a minute into Mollie's room, she returned for Hugh. He trod softly, as men do in the presence of sickness or some mystery of life or death that awes them.

Mollie had never looked lovelier. A faint pink of apple blossoms fluttered into her cheeks. In the crook of her arm lay Alexander Hugh McClintock, a

red and wrinkled little morsel of humanity. She smiled with such a radiance of motherhood that the man's bachelor heart registered a pang of envy.

"Oh, Hugh, I'm so happy," she whispered as he kissed her.

"That's fine—fine," he said gently.

"We named him after your father and you. Scot would have it, wouldn't he, Vicky?"

The dark young woman nodded.

Hugh felt the flush dyeing his face. "Little Vicky!" he stammered. "Why, I thought——"

"Thank you for the dolls, kind sir," she said, and curtsied.

He felt like a fool. How long was it since he had sent her a black doll baby?

"I thought you were still a little girl," he blurted. "Nobody told me——"

"—that little girls grow up. They do."

"You can't be more than fourteen—or fifteen," he charged, trying to escape from his mistake.

"I'm going on seventeen, sir," she said demurely.

"Your letter——"

"—was from a little girl to whom you sent a nigger doll."

"You said in it——"

"I said thank you for the doll. Wasn't it a proper letter for a little girl to write to a kind gentleman?"

She asked it with a manner of naïve innocence,

hardly a hint of mirth in the dark, long-lashed eyes meeting his so directly.

Mollie laughed. "She wrote and asked us not to tell you she had grown up, Hugh. We wondered when you would guess she wasn't any longer a child."

"I've been several kinds of an idiot in my time, but this—this takes the cake," Hugh said ruefully.

Suddenly Victoria relented. She held out her hand impulsively. Her smile was warm and kind.

"You don't mind my little joke, do you?"

"Not a bit. I brought it on myself."

"If you want to know, I thought it was dear of you to remember the little girl away at school alone." A faint shell pink beat into the clear satiny cheeks.

"I liked that little girl. She had a lot of git-up-an'-git."

Vicky laughed. "She was a terror, if that's what you mean. Always in mischief. Mollie will tell you that."

"Yes, but she was a tender-hearted little cyclone," smiled the older sister.

Scot came into the room. "'Lo, Hugh," he said. "When'd you get back?" Without waiting for an answer he passed to the bed upon which were his wife and his firstborn. Lightly his hand caressed her soft hair. "Everything right, Mollie?"

Her eyes rested happily in his. "Everything in the world, Scot."

"This nurse I got for you treating you proper?" With a motion of his head he indicated Victoria.

"She's spoiling me."

"A. H. McClintock behaving himself?"

"He's an angel."

He kissed her. "Must take after his father then."

"I hope he does. He looks like you."

Scot laughed, and with a touch of embarrassment turned to his brother. "You see what you'll be letting yourself in for when you marry, Hugh. Got to walk a straight and narrow line to keep your wife fooled about you. And for a reward she'll tell you that a red wrinkled little skeezicks looks like you."

"He's the dearest little baby I ever saw," protested Vicky warmly.

Scot poked a forefinger at the midriff of his heir. "I kind of like the little grasshopper myself."

"You know very well you're *crazy* about him," Vicky answered triumphantly.

Mollie only smiled. It was not necessary for her any longer to reassure herself about Scot's love. She knew him. The days of her doubts were past.

Presently Scot left the bedside and sat down on the arm of a big chair. "How's Piodie, Hugh?"

"One live camp," the younger brother answered. "Plenty of room for us there. We can put an outfit in and get all the teaming we want. One objection is that the Dodsons run the camp."

"Run it how?"

"Own the biggest store, the stamp mills, a controlling interest in the best producing mines, the stage line, half the town site, and the sheriff."

"Anything else?" asked Scot with a dry smile.

"A bunch of thugs and the courts. Our old friend Sam Dutch is their handy man."

"Did you see Dutch?"

"We met," Hugh answered briefly. "I bumped into Jim Budd and Dan Byers, too. They're runnin' a feed corral there. We located a bunch of prospects together. I wrote you about that."

"Yes."

"Took up one in yore name."

"And one in trust for Vicky, you said in the letter."

Hugh flushed to the roots of his hair. He turned to the girl. "A part of that fool mistake of mine. I kinda thought it might turn out a good prospect and if so you'd have it when you grew up. I didn't aim to—to overstep."

Victoria had been listening eagerly to every word they had said. She had her own reasons for being interested in Piodie.

"Of course you didn't. It was for that wild little Vicky you used to know. I'll thank you for her, but of course I can't keep a claim you took up for me on a misunderstanding."

"I wish you would. Not likely it'll amount to anything. But we've got more than we can work now. You're welcome as the sun in May."

"Do you think that's *really* true—about his not wanting it?" Vicky asked Scot. "I'd like to take it if—if you folks can't use it. But I'm not going to rob you and him."

"I'd take it, Vicky," Scot told her. "Chances are we'll never do the assessment work on our own claims. We're not miners—not by business. Hugh has all he can handle without yours."

She turned to Hugh with a brisk little nod of the dark head. "Then I'll take it—and thank you."

"What will you do with it now you have it?" Mollie asked.

"Do the assessment work—have a shaft dug," answered Vicky. "I have four hundred dollars left of the Virginia Dodson Fund, and, dear people, I'm going to begin earning more week after next."

"How?" asked her sister, surprised.

"I've been asked to teach school at Piodie and I accepted to-day."

Mollie protested, and knew that her protest was in vain. Her young sister was compact of energy. It expressed itself in the untamed joyous freedom of her rhythmic tread, in the vitality of the spirit emanating from the light erect figure of the bright-eyed vestal. If she had made up her mind to go to Piodie to teach, there would be no stopping her. All Mollie could do would be to see through Scot that the girl had a good boarding place where she would be properly looked after.

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE BLIZZARD

THE McClintocks decided after all not to put in a freight outfit to Piodie. The Dodsons beat them to it by putting in a large number of wagons as adjuncts to the stages they ran from Carson.

From Hugh's partners word came at intervals of the progress made in sinking the shaft of the Ground Hog, which was the name they had given the mine. These messages reflected Budd's enthusiasm. The postscript of each of them, whether it came in the form of a letter or a word-of-mouth greeting, was to the effect that he expected to strike the ledge now at any time.

He wrote in one note:

> Bald Knob is sure looking up. Ralph Dodson has done made some locations above us, and two lads from American Flat of the name of Jenson have staked out a claim just below us down the hill. They're running a tunnel in from the hillside. Well, Kid, look out for news of a big strike soon. We're sure right close to the vein, looks like.

Hugh smiled when he read it. Budd had been on the verge of a discovery so many times that his non-

resident partner discounted the prophecy. There was no use in building up hopes that would probably never be realized.

In another letter the fat man mentioned a second piece of news. "Our schoolmarm here, Miss Victoria Lowell, has begun scratching dirt right lively on that claim you staked out for her. She has got a Swede on the job, but she has been out 'most every Saturday to see how tricks are. I notice Ralph Dodson has been mighty attentive to her. *You better drift over, Kid, and do your assessment work on that claim if you aim to get it patented in your name.* Me, if I was a high-stepping colt like you, I'll be doggoned if I'd let that smooth guy Dodson jump as rich a prospect as the Little Schoolmarm."

This time Hugh did not smile. Budd, of course, was on the wrong track. He had leaped to the conclusion that Hugh was in love with the girl because he had staked a claim for her, and in his blunt blundering way he was giving his friend a tip. McClintock was troubled. He profoundly distrusted Ralph Dodson, had disliked him from the first moment when their eyes met. The fellow was a ravening wolf if he had ever seen one. But he was handsome, well-dressed, the kind of man who is like wildfire among women. He probably knew how to make love amazingly well.

And Vicky—impetuous, imperious little Vicky of the brave heart and generous instincts—was just the

girl to yield to the glamour of his charm. He could see now her flashing face, finely cut like a rare brilliant, full of fire and high lights. She had better be dead than the wife of Ralph Dodson.

The thing worried him. It would not let him alone. At work and in his leisure hours he thought of the girl with keen-edged anxiety. His imagination began to play him tricks. At dusk, as he walked to his room, he would see her filmily in front of him, moving like sweet music toward the open arms of Dodson. Once she turned and gave Hugh her cryptic, tantalizing smile.

Someone ought to interfere to save the girl from an event so ruinous. He thought of telling Scot, but after all he had nothing better to go on than the gossip of old Jim Budd.

On swift impulse he decided to go to Piodie himself. It would not do any harm, anyhow, to have a look at the Ground Hog and see how it was developing. While he was there maybe he could drop a casual hint to Vicky. Perhaps he would discover that Budd's warning was all moonshine.

Winter was white on the hills when Hugh started over the Geiger Grade to Reno by stage. At Reno he found traffic tied up. The snow in the valleys was deep and it drifted with the wind so fast that the cuts filled up and prevented the stage from getting through. Hugh learned that a pack train had broken trail the day before and had reached Stam-

pede Notch in safety. From there it was working across the divide to Piodie.

He bought a pair of snowshoes and set out on the long trip. The day was warm and the snow soft. This made travel difficult, and McClintock made slow progress until he was out of the Truckee Meadows. By afternoon he was in the hills. The wind was whistling in gusts, sometimes wrathfully, again in a plaintive whine. It was colder now and the snow less slushy. In spite of fatigue he covered the miles faster than he had been able to do in the valley.

Many times he glanced at the sky uneasily. It was heavy with dun clouds, and unless he missed his guess snow would fall soon and in quantity.

Came dusk, and after dusk darkness. Hugh kept going. He was an old-timer and could tell his direction by the wind, the dip of the land, and the slope of the snow waves.

It was nearly midnight when he knocked at the door of a Mormon ranch house and asked shelter for the night. Healthily fatigued in every muscle, he slept like a schoolboy almost round the clock.

Before he took the road again it was noon. At intervals during the night snow had fallen, but just now the storm had died down.

"Better stay another night," the rancher advised. "Gettin' her back up for a blizzard, looks like."

The taste of the air and the look of the sky backed

his prophecy. There was going to be more snow and a lot of it. Very likely there would be snow and wind together. But Hugh did not want to be tied up for several days in the hills. He decided to make a dash for Piodie. The town was not more than twenty-five miles away. If his luck held he would be in by supper time.

He had covered half the distance before the storm hit him hard. It began with wind, heavy sweeping gusts of it driving over the hills and into the ravines. Presently snow came, a hard sleet that pelted his face like ground glass. The temperature was falling fast. Hugh set his teeth and ploughed forward, putting his head down into the blizzard as a football player does when he is bucking the line.

Young and warm-blooded though he was, the chill of the tempest bit to his bones and sapped his vitality. The wind and the fine sleet were like a wall that pressed closely and savagely on him. Now and again he raised his head and took the full fury of the leaping storm to make sure that he was still on the trail.

Far and near became relative words. The end of the world, as far as he could tell, was almost within reach of his outstretched hand. The whistle of the shrieking wind was so furious that it deadened all sounds, even itself. The sleety snow was a silent stinging foe that flogged him mile after mile as he wallowed on.

The afternoon had been dark, but an added murkiness told him that night was at hand. He was nearly exhausted, and in the darkness, with the raging blizzard all about him, he felt that directions would become confused. He must be close to town now, but if he should get lost, a quarter of a mile would be as far away as Carson.

And presently he knew that he was lost. He was staggering through the deep snow on a hillside. Somehow he had got off the trail and it was swallowed up in the bleak night. He had an extraordinary store of strength, vitality, and courage. But it was not in human endurance to stand up under the flailing of the wind and sleet that pelted him, to keep going through the heavy drifts that had been swept into every hollow and draw. The bitter cold penetrated closer to his heart. An overpowering desire to lie down and sleep tugged at his will.

Not for a moment did he give up. One of his snowshoes was lost in a snow bank. He kicked off the other. Now on his hands and knees, now on his feet, weaving forward like a drunken man, all sense of direction gone, he still plunged into the howling waste of desolation that hemmed him in.

He followed the path of least resistance. It took him down hill into a draw. His stumbling steps zigzagged toward a lower level and he followed the arroyo to its mouth. A slight dip in the ground swung him to the right.

His boots were clogged with snow. The muscles of his thighs were so weary that each time he dragged a leg out of the drifts it felt as though weighted with a cannon ball. There were times when he could make ground only by throwing his body forward and beating down the white bank that obstructed the way. Still he crawled on, an indomitable atom of fighting humanity in a great frozen desert of death.

A groping hand struck something solid. The stiff fingers of the hand searched the surface of the barrier. Hugh's heart renewed hope. He had come up against a pile of corded wood. It was cut in short lengths to fit a stove. The chances were that somewhere within fifty feet of him was a house.

But where? In what direction? The fury of the storm filled the night, made it opaque as a wall. He could not see five feet in front of him. The landmark that he had found he dared not leave, for if he wandered from it the chances were that he would never find it again. It would be of no use to shout. The shrieking wind would drown a voice instantly. Yet he did call out, again and again.

The thing he did was born of the necessity of the situation. He dug aside the snow from the top of the pile and with a loose piece of wood hammered free others from the niche into which they were frozen. How he did this he could never afterwards tell, for his muscles were so paralyzed from cold that

they would scarcely answer the call his will made on them.

Then, hard and straight, he flung a stick out into the storm. His reserves of strength were nearly gone, but he held himself to the job before him. One after another he threw the pieces of firewood, following a definite plan as to direction, in such a way as to make the place where he stood the centre of a circle. His hope was to strike the house. If he could do this, and if the door happened to be on the side of the house nearest him, then the light of the lamp would perhaps penetrate into the storm so that he could see it.

He knew it was a gamble with all the odds against him. He was backing a series of contingencies each one of which must turn in his favour if he was to win.

He collapsed on the wood pile at last from sheer physical exhaustion. For a few moments he lay there, helpless, drifting toward that sleep from which he would never awake in this world. But the will to live still struggled feebly. He was of that iron breed which has won the West for civilization against untold odds. It was not in him to give up as long as he could force his tortured body forward.

Even now he did not forget the craft of the frontiersman which reads signs and makes deductions from them. The corded wood was two lengths deep. Near one end there was a sag in it two or three feet deep. This depression was greater on the side

next Hugh. He reasoned that it is human nature to choose the easiest way. The people who lived in the house would use first that part of the wood which was nearest. Therefore it followed that the house must be on the same side of the corded pine as he was, and it must be closest to the place from which the wood had been carried to the kitchen stove.

He struck out at a right angle from the pile. Before he had gone three steps he stumbled and fell. His prostration was so complete that he could not at once get to his feet again. He lay inert for a time, then crawled up again and lurched forward. A second time his knees buckled under him. As he fell, an outstretched hand hit the wall of the house.

Weakly he felt his way along the wall till he came to a door. His hand fumbled with the latch, but his frozen fingers could not work the catch. He beat on the door.

It opened unexpectedly, and he plunged forward to the floor of the cabin. He saw, as though a long way off, the faces of devils and of angels lit by high lights. His body lost weight, and he floated into space luxuriously. Pain and fatigue, devils and angels, all were blotted out.

CHAPTER XXII

A HAVEN OF REFUGE

VICKY was enjoying herself tremendously. All her young life she had been chaperoned and directed. Teachers had watched over and instructed her. She had better do this; it was not ladylike to do that. The right kind of a girl could not be too careful what she did and how she did it. The sweet demureness of watchful waiting was the only proper attitude of a nice young woman toward that important and vital business of getting married. So much she had learned at school.

It happened that Vicky did not want to get married—not yet, at any rate. She wanted to try her own wings. She wanted to flutter out into the world and see what it was like.

Already she had made experiments and discoveries. One of them was that if you smiled in the right way when you asked for it you could get anything you wanted from men. She had wanted a globe and and some new seats for the schoolroom, and the directors had voted them cheerfully even though the district was short of funds. Jim Budd had spent

two hours building some bookshelves she needed for her bedroom, just because she had said pretty please to him.

Now, Mrs. Budd was different. She liked Victoria and fed her well and saw that she wore her heavy coat when it was cold, but the young woman understood that smiles would not have the least effect on any of that plump mother's decisions. In this Mrs. Budd was like the rest of her sex. They did not go out of their way to please you because you were a—well, a not exactly plain girl.

The experiments of the young school teacher were innocent enough. She was not by nature a coquette. But the world was her oyster, and she meant to have a perfectly delightful time prying it open. She found that there were a good many people, at least fifty per cent. of whom were of the maculine gender, ready to lend a hand at operating on the bivalve.

One of the most assiduous was Ralph Dodson.

Vicky discouraged his attentions. For one thing, he was the brother of a man she had detested all her life. She did not want to have anything whatever to do with a Dodson. After what had taken place it was not decent that the families should have any relationship at all.

But she found Ralph Dodson not easily disheartened. He did not lay himself open to a direct snub. A member of the board had properly introduced him to her. If he came out of a store as she was going

down the street and walked a block beside her she could hardly rebuff him. Before she had been at Piodie a month, the clerk of the school district retired and Dodson was appointed in his place. This annoyed her, because she now had to see a good deal of him; but she could not very well accuse him of having brought about the change merely for that purpose.

Vicky found herself studying the man. She looked in him for the same traits that had made her as a child hate his brother. It irritated her that she did not find them. Ralph Dodson was strong, competent, energetic. She would have liked to discover him mean, but instead she uncovered in his view a largeness of vision in civic affairs that surprised her. He believed in good schools even though they cost money.

One flaw she found in him. He had kept out of the army during the war and made money while Scot and Hugh were fighting for the Union. But this was true of many men in the far West, which was a long way from the fighting line.

One day an accident took place that increased her unwilling admiration of him. Near the schoolhouse was an abandoned mine tunnel, poorly timbered, in which she had forbidden the children to play. Little Johnny Haxtun, playing hide and seek, ventured into it and in the darkness stumbled against a rotten post. At his weight the support crumbled.

There was a cave-in, and Johnny lay crushed beneath a mass of rock and timber.

Among the first of the rescuers to arrive was Ralph Dodson. He told the young school teacher, who was standing there white and shaken, to get a doctor and have first-aid relief at hand in case Johnny should be alive when he was released.

Then, axe in hand, he led the men into the tunnel. It was dangerous work. The fallen timbering had to be cut and dug away. At any moment an avalanche of rock and dirt might pour down from above and kill them all. Dodson did not shirk. He stood up to his job deep in the tunnel, regardless of the little slides trickling down that might at any instant precipitate a hundred tons upon him. The worst of it was that the more dirt and jammed timbers were removed, the greater the peril of a second cave-in.

Johnny was still alive. A couple of crossed timbers had protected him from the weight of rock and dirt. Vicky heard his whimpering and came into the tunnel to comfort him. But Dodson would have none of that. He ordered the girl into the open instantly.

"This isn't a woman's job. Get out," he told her curtly.

Perhaps she resented his manner at the moment, but when half an hour later he emerged from the tunnel carrying the maimed body of the little

fellow she forgot her pique. The man's hands were torn and bleeding, his face stained with sweat and streaks of dirt. The clothes of which he was usually so careful were daubed with yellow clay. She remembered only that he had risked his life to save Johnny.

Nor could she forget it when he called that evening at her boarding house, ostensibly to tell her that the doctor had set Johnny's broken leg and found no other injury from the accident.

"It's going to be hard on his mother. You know she's a widow and takes in washing," Vicky said. "I wonder if we couldn't give a school entertainment for her benefit."

"It won't be necessary," he said promptly. "It's partly my fault the accident happened. As school clerk I should have had the mouth of the tunnel boarded up. I'm going to pay all the bills and see that Mrs. Haxtun doesn't lose anything by it."

Victoria felt a glow at her heart. It always did her good to find out that people were kinder and more generous than she had supposed. Her judgment of Ralph Dodson had been that he was hard and selfish. Now she was ashamed of herself for thinking so. She thought of the "Greater love than this" verse, and in her soul she humbled herself before him. What a little prig she had been to set herself up as arbiter of right and wrong.

Dodson made the most of the opportunity chance

had given him. He used it as a wedge to open up a friendship with the girl. She was still reluctant, but this was based on some subconscious impulse. All the fine generosity in her was in arms to be fair to him regardless of his brother.

As soon as he learned that she had a claim on Bald Knob that she wanted to develop Dodson put his experience at her service. He helped her arrange with a man to do the actual assessment work and he went over the ground with her to choose the spot for the shaft. Afterwards he kept an eye on Oscar Sorenson to see that he did a fair day's work for the pay he received.

On holidays Vicky usually walked or rode out to her claim to see how Sorenson was getting along. She was pretty apt to meet Dodson on the way to Bald Knob or else superintending operations there. Two or three times he came down to her prospect at noon and they strolled up a little gulch to pick wild flowers and eat their lunch together.

He knew so much more about the world than she did that she found his talk interesting. The glimpse she had had of San Francisco had whetted her appetite. Were other cities like the one by the Golden Gate, gay and full of life and fashion which young girls at a finishing school were not permitted to see? He told her of London and Paris and Vienna, and her innocent credulity accepted what he said at face value. He had the gift of talk, the manner of a man

of the world. From the confident ease of his descriptions she could not guess that he had never been in Paris or Vienna and only once in London for a flying visit to float a mining scheme.

"You'll not be going to the mine to-day, dearie," Mrs. Budd said to Vicky one Saturday morning when the hills were white with a blanket of snow.

"Yes. I promised Oscar to bring his mail and some tobacco. Besides, I want to see how he's been getting along."

"If you take my advice you'll stay comfy at home and not go traipsing all over the hills gettin' your feet an' your skirts wet."

One of the things Vicky rarely did was to accept advice and follow it. A fault of her years and of her temperament was that she had to gain her wisdom through experience.

"I love to get out in the snow and tramp in it," Vicky said cheerfully, helping herself to another hot biscuit. "And I'll not get wet if I wear arctics and tuck up my skirts when I'm out of town."

"Hmp! If you're set on it you'll go. I know that well enough. But you'll come home early, won't you? There's a lot more snow up in the sky yet, and by night we're likely to have some of it."

Vicky promised. When she struck the trail to Bald Knob she discovered that the snow was deeper than she had supposed. But there was a well-beaten

track as far as the shoulder of the ridge. Beyond that she had to break a path for herself.

It was heavy work. She grew tired long before she reached the mine. But she kept going rather than turn back. It was nearly two o'clock when Sorenson answered her hail.

Vicky did not stay long at the mine. She did not like the look of the sky. The wind was rising, too, and the temperature falling. Once she thought of asking Sorenson to go back to town with her, but she scouted the idea promptly and dismissed it. It did not agree with her view of the self-reliance she was cultivating. Incidentally, too, Sorenson was a lazy, sulky fellow who would resent taking any unnecessary trouble. She did not want to put herself under an obligation to him.

The wind had sifted a good deal of snow into the tracks she had made on the way down from the shoulder of the hill. It came now in great swirling gusts, filling the air with the light surface snow. By the time she had passed the Dodson properties the wind had risen to a gale, a biting wintry hurricane that almost lifted her from her feet. A stinging sleet swept into her face and blinded her. She found it difficult to make out the way.

Before she reached the foot of the slope below Bald Knob she was very tired. The wind drifts had filled the path, so that she had to break her own

trail. The fury of the storm was constantly increasing.

In the comparative shelter of a little draw she stopped to decide what she had better do. It was still a mile and a half to town. She did not believe she could possibly make it even if she did not lose the way. Nor could she climb Bald Knob again to the Dodson camp. That would not be within her power. There was a little cabin in the next draw where Ralph slept when he did not care to go to town after spending the day on his Bald Knob property. It was usually stocked with supplies of food and fuel. No doubt it would be unoccupied now.

She put her head down into the white blizzard and trudged round the edge of the ridge that divided the two small gulches. Three minutes later she pushed open the door of the cabin and walked in.

A man sitting at a table jumped to his feet with a startled oath. "Goddamighty, who are you?" he demanded.

Vicky was as much taken aback as he. "I thought the cabin was empty," she explained. "I'm Victoria Lowell, the school teacher at Piodie. I've been up to my claim."

The man's look was half a scowl and half a leer. He was a big round-shouldered ruffian with long hair and tangled, unkempt beard. There floated in her mind a vague and fugitive recollection of having seen him before somewhere.

"Better dry yorese'f," he said ungraciously.

From the fireplace a big twisted piñon knot threw out a glow of heat. The girl took off her coat, shook the snow from the wet skirts, and moved forward to absorb the warmth.

Her host pushed a chair toward her with his foot.

She sank into it, worn out. Presently the moist skirts began to steam and the warmth of the fire made her drowsy. She aroused herself to conversation.

"Sorry I had to trouble you. I was 'fraid I couldn't make it to town."

"Hel'v a day," he agreed.

On the table were a whisky bottle and a glass. He indicated them with a sweep of his hand. "Have a nip. Warm you up, miss."

"No, thanks. I'm all right."

Over her stole a delightful lassitude, the reaction from her fight with the storm. She looked sleepily into the live coals. The howling of the storm outside was deadened enough to make a sort of lullaby. Her head began to nod and her eyelids closed. With a start she brought herself awake again.

"Didn't know I was so done up," she murmured.

"'S all right. Sleep if you want to, miss," the man told her.

Not for an hour or more did she open her eyes again. The table was set for a meal. A coffee-pot was heating on some coals and a black kettle hung suspended from a crane above the fire.

"Come an' get it, miss," the man said gruffly when he saw that she was awake.

Vicky discovered that she was hungry. She drank the coffee he poured out and ate the stew he ladled from the kettle. He did not eat with her.

"If the storm would break I'd try to reach town," she said presently.

"No chance. You stay here where you're safe, miss."

"My friends will worry."

"Let 'em."

"What was that?" the girl asked.

She had heard a sound of something striking the side of the house.

"Prob'ly a limb flung by the wind. Never saw such a night."

Victoria shuddered. But for good fortune she might have now been perishing in the snow.

"How long do you think it will last?" she asked.

"Can't tell. Maybe till mo'ning. Maybe two-three days."

"Oh, it couldn't last that long," the girl cried, appalled.

"Hmp! Guess you don't know a Nevada blizzard." Again he looked at her, a leer on his heavy face. "You're liable to have to put up with old Sam for quite a spell, missie."

Vicky did not answer. Her eyes were meeting his and the blood crept into her cheeks. There was a

furtive sinister menace between his narrowed lips that reminded her of a wolf creeping toward its kill. She looked away, her heart hammering fast. What sort of a creature was this man with whom she was locked up a million miles away from all the safeguards of society? In the glowing coals she found no answer to that question.

Presently she stole a sidelong look at him. He was pouring a drink from the whisky bottle.

"How?" he said, lifting the glass toward her. He tilted back his hairy throat and drained the tumbler.

A heavy pounding on the door startled the drinker. He listened.

Victoria was at the door instantly. She flung it open. A man lurched forward and crumpled up on the floor.

CHAPTER XXIII

TWO PLUS ONE MAKES THREE

WITH a swift movement of her supple body Vicky was on her knees beside the man. She slipped an arm under his head. Icy sleet encrusted his clothes. It clung in icicles to his hair and eyebrows. It matted his lashes and small Vandyke beard.

From her throat came an astonished little cry of recognition. The man was Hugh McClintock. Over her shoulder she called to the big man at the table.

"Bring me whisky and water—please."

He brought it, then closed the door. Awkwardly he stood above her.

"Had a hell'v a close call," he growled sulkily. It did not suit him to entertain a second guest.

Vicky let the whisky drop between the lips. Presently Hugh opened his eyes. He smiled feebly at her. Surprise wiped out the smile. "Little Vicky," he murmured.

"Ump-hu," she nodded. Then, to the hulking

figure behind her, the girl gave order: "Help me carry him nearer the fire. He's 'most frozen."

The fellow shambled forward and stooped down. As he did so his eyes fell on the face of the helpless traveller. He ripped out a savage oath. With the sweep of an arm he dragged the girl to her feet and hurled her back to the wall.

His fury struggled for expression. "Gotcha. Gotcha good an' right. I'm gonna stomp the life outa you. Gona put my heel on yore throat an' crack yore spine. Un'erstand?"

Victoria knew the ruffian now. A flash of memory carried her back to a day in her childhood when she had seen a horrible apelike figure standing over the prostrate body of a man from which life had just been violently ejected. She saw the same gargoyle face, the same hulking muscle-bound shoulders and long arms with hairy wrists projecting from the coat sleeves. Her memory brought her a second picture of the same incident. A smiling young fellow was lifting her gently from the ground. His hand was caressing her hair softly as he spoke. She recalled even his words. "Run right along into the wagon where yore dad is, li'l' girl, an' don't turn yore head."

The girl's arm rested on a shelf, in the same position where it had fallen when she had been hurled back. Her fingers touched something cold.

"You first. Yore brother next," the guttural voice

of Dutch went on, and the horrible malice of it seemed unhuman. "I been waitin' a mighty long time, an' I gotcha at last. Sure have. Thought I was scared of you an' that damned high-heeled brother o' yourn, did you? Me, I was settin' back an' waitin'—waitin' for my chance. An' it's come, like I knew it would. Beg. Whine like a papoose. It won't do you no good, but go to it jest the same. Hear me—before I turn you over an' crack yore backbone at the neck."

His gloating was horrible. It sent chills through Victoria's blood. Her fingers spasmodically closed—on the ivory handle of a revolver. The force of the recoil had flung her hand into contact with the revolver Dutch had tossed on the shelf a few hours earlier.

"Don'tcha hear me? Beg me to let you go. Crawl over an' lick my boots. Maybe I'll go easy on you like you two dern fools done with me." A jangle of hideous laughter accompanied his words. He kicked his opponent in the side.

Hugh looked at him steadily, without a word.

"Thought you had the Injun sign on me, eh? Both of you? Well, I'll say right here there never was a minute I was scared of either one of you—or both. Me, I'm Sam Dutch, a sure enough killer. An' you—you're Number Fifteen. Ole Dan Tucker's come to git his supper, an' he ain't too late, neither."

He was working himself up for murder. Soon his passion would be boiling over. Then he would strike.

One thought dominated Vicky, drove out all others. She must save Hugh McClintock. She forgot to be afraid, forgot to remember that this scoundrel was the terror of Nevada. Noiselessly she crept forward and pushed the revolver into his back just below the shoulders.

"If you move I'll shoot you," she said hoarsely.

The stream of curses died in the fellow's throat. His jaw fell. Ludicrously his immature mind groped with the situation.

Three slow taps rose from the floor. Dutch gasped. Those taps had always heralded disaster for him.

Vicky drew a knife from his boot and a revolver from the belt he was wearing. She dropped them on the floor.

"Walk to the door," she ordered. "Go outside. If you come in before I call you I'll shoot holes in you."

She hardly recognized her own voice. There was in it a new note. She knew that if he refused to go she would kill him as she would a wolf.

Dutch whined. "You wouldn't drive me into the storm after I done took you in an' fed you, miss. There can't any one live in that blizzard. I was jest a-funnin' about him. Jest my li'l way."

"Go on," she told him inexorably. "Now."

He went. She closed the door behind him.

McClintock crept toward the fire. Vicky gathered the weapons and put them down beside her. Then she took one of his hands in hers and began to rub it to restore circulation. She worked on the other hand, on his ears, his face, his throat. She helped him to take off his boots and in spite of his protests massaged his frozen feet.

The pain was intense as the circulation began to be renewed in his body. He clamped his teeth to keep back the groans. He walked up and down nursing his hands and his ears. But not a sound came from his lips.

"I know it's awful," Vicky comforted. "But the pain's a good sign. Soon as it's gone you'll be all right."

He grinned. There was nothing to do but endure until the circulation was fully restored. He beat the back of his hands against the palms. If Dutch should grow troublesome he might need the use of his fingers shortly.

A fist beat on the door.

"Shall I let him in?" the girl asked.

Hugh picked up one of the revolvers and crooked his stiff forefinger over the trigger. He could make out to use it at a pinch.

"Yes, let him in," he said.

Vicky took the second revolver. The knife Hugh thrust into one of his boot legs.

When the girl opened the door Dutch slouched in. He was covered from head to foot with frozen snow and sleet. His venomous eyes slanted first at McClintock, then at the young woman. The sullen impotent hatred in his heart was plain enough to send goose quills down Vicky's spine. She knew that if ever he were top dog it would go hard with her or Hugh.

The man poured out half a tumbler of whisky and drank it neat. He shuffled up to the fire, taking the opposite side to the one occupied by his guests. Silently he glared at them. But for the moment he could do nothing. They were armed. He was not.

Exhausted by his long battle with the storm, Hugh could hardly keep his eyes open. His worn body called for sleep. But with that wild beast crouched five feet away he dared not relax his vigilance for a moment.

Vicky whispered in his ear: "Cuddle down in the chair and sleep a while. I'll watch him."

Hugh shook his head. No, that would never do. At some unexpected instant the killer would fling his huge bulk on her and wrest the revolver from her hand. Much as his system craved it, Hugh rejected sleep as unsafe. He would stay awake and protect her.

But even as he was firmly resolving this his eyelids drooped. His head relaxed against the back of the chair. He made an effort to throw off the drowsiness pressing him down. It was a feeble and unsuccessful one. Presently he was sound asleep.

From the summit of Bald Knob the storm swept down with a roar. It hurled itself into the valley with screams like those of a lost soul. It beat against the hut in furious gusts, rattling the windows and shaking the door like some living monster intent on destruction. For hours its rage continued unabated.

Meanwhile, from opposite sides of the fireplace, the desperado and the girl watched each other. He had a feral cunning. It had served to keep him alive more than once when he seemed at the end of his rope. Now he piled the fuel high in the stone chimney and pretended to go to sleep.

The glow of the heat had the intended effect. It formed an alliance with Vicky's fatigue. She, too, began to nod at last, her wariness lulled by the stertorous breathing of the big huddled figure opposite. The sense of responsibility was still active in her mind. She decided afterwards that she must have cat-napped, as drivers do on a long night trip, now and again for a few seconds at a time.

From one of these she awakened with a start. Dutch was tiptoeing toward her. Their eyes met. He crouched for the leap as her fingers busied themselves with the revolver.

The roar of the explosion filled the cabin. The weight of the plunging man flung Vicky to the floor. She lay face down, breathless, oppressed by his huge bulk. The six-shooter had gone clattering beyond her reach.

The weight lifted from her. She heard scuffling feet and heavy grunts as she recovered the weapon and fled to the wall. When she turned it was to see the butt of a six-gun rising and falling. There was a gasp, a groan, and one of the struggling figures sank down.

The one still standing was Hugh McClintock.

The man on the floor writhed painfully, turned over, and sank into quietude.

"Are you hurt?" Hugh asked Vicky.

"No. Are you?"

He shook his head. "I fell asleep. Lucky it was no worse."

"So did I. He was creeping on me when I woke. Is—is he dead?" she asked, awed.

"No such luck. I tapped his bean with my gun." He stooped over the prostrate man and turned him on his back. "Hello! Here's a wound in his shoulder. You must have hit him."

"Oh, I hope not," Vicky cried.

She looked at the big revolver with a face of horror and threw it on the shelf where she had found it some hours earlier.

"Probably saved my life," Hugh told her quietly.

"And you haven't killed him. He'll be all right in a week or two. Good work, Vicky."

"I—didn't know what I was doing," she sobbed. "My fingers just pressed."

Dutch groaned.

"Best thing could have happened," Hugh said cheerfully. "He'll not trouble us any more. Have to dress the wound, though. If it makes you sick to——"

"It won't," she cried eagerly. "Let me help. What can I do?" Her reaction was toward activity. If she could help to look after the man she might forget the awful thing she had by chance escaped doing.

"Rummage through that drawer. Find clean shirts or rags. Tear one into strips," Hugh told her.

She flew to the drawer and began tossing out socks, woollen shirts, old gloves, a pipe, some "dog leg" tobacco, a pack of cards, a few ore samples, and a vest or two of fancy patterns. Near the bottom she found a cotton shirt. This she ripped up for bandages.

McClintock brought water and washed the wound. His enemy permitted it, sulky as a sore bear. The wounded man winced when Hugh tried, as gently as possible, to locate the bullet.

"Lay off o' that," he growled. "Doc Rogers'll find the pill."

"Expect you're right about that," Hugh agreed.

"He can follow the drift better than I can. Never worked on that level before myself. Doc will sure strike the ore when he digs for it."

Vicky passed the bandages to him as he needed them. He noticed once that the blood had washed from her face and left it colourless.

"You'd better sit down," he said gently. "I can manage alone."

"No," she told him firmly. In spite of the soft pallor of the neck and throat there was a look of strength about her. He knew she would not faint. The spirit of the girl shone in her eyes.

But afterwards, when Dutch had been ordered to lie down on the cot by the window, Hugh took charge of Vicky without consulting her. He arranged three chairs in such a way that they might serve for a bed, padded them with sacks, and doubled a blanket so that the girl could lie between its folds. An old coat belonging to Ralph Dodson did well enough for a pillow. In five minutes she was breathing softly and regularly, though she had told Hugh it would be impossible for her to sleep. The firelight playing on her cheek reflected a faint and delicate colour.

When Vicky woke it was morning. A pale and wintry sunbeam stole through the window. The storm had passed. Hugh was cooking at the fireplace, his back to her. The desperado was sleeping noisily and restlessly.

She rose, flushed with embarrassment, and arranged her wrinkled and disordered skirts.

"Good mo'ning," the young man called cheerfully without turning.

"Good morning," she answered shyly For the first time since she had come into the house a queer surge of timidity swept her blood. The modesty of the girl was in arms.

"Your shoes are on the hearth warming."

"Yes," she murmured.

He carried hot water in a basin to a summer kitchen adjoining the main cabin.

"Towel hangin' on the nail," he told her when he returned a moment later.

Vicky gave him a grateful look and passed into the back room. Ten minutes later she emerged flushed and radiant. The dark rebellious hair had been smoothed down. To Hugh the blue dress looked miraculously fresh and clean.

"Come an' get it," he called. just as he would have done to another man.

His matter-of-fact acceptance of the situation dissipated measurably her sense of alarm at the shocked proprieties. If he were not disconcerted at the intimacy into which the blizzard had plunged them, why should she be? With the good healthy appetite of youth she ate eggs, bacon, corn pone, and two flapjacks.

"When can we go?" she asked as he poured coffee into the tin cup before her.

"Soon as we've eaten. Some job to buck the drifts to town but we'll make it."

"And him?" A little lift of her head showed that Vicky's elliptical question referred to Dutch.

"I'll notify his friends to come and look after him."

Hugh broke trail and Vicky followed in his steps. They travelled slowly, for in places the drifts were high. Usually the girl's clear complexion showed little colour, but now she glowed from exercise. Once when he turned to lend her a hand through a bank of snow she shook her head gaily.

"No, I'm doing fine. Isn't it a *splendiferous* day?"

It was. The sun had come out in all its glory and was driving the clouds in ragged billows toward the horizon. The snow sparkled. It was crisp and sharp beneath their feet. The air, washed clean by the tempest, filled the lungs as with wine. Not on creation's dawn had the world looked purer or more unsullied.

Youth calls to youth. Vicky looked at Hugh with a new interest. She had always admired his clean strength, the wholesome directness of his character. To-day her eyes saw him differently. He belonged to her generation, not that of Mollie and Scot. For the first time his personality touched her own life. They could not be the same hereafter.

They would have to know each other better—or not at all.

In her childhood days, when fairy tales were still possible, she had dreamed of a prince in shining silver armour, handsome as Apollo Belvedere, valiant as Lancelot, a pure and ardent young Galahad. Now, as she followed the trail breaker through the white banks, an involuntary smile touched her lips. She was wondering, in the shy daring fashion of a girl's exploring mind, what Hugh McClintock was really like behind the mask of his physical clothing. Certainly nobody could be less like the shining knight of her dreams than he. For Hugh walked the straight plain road of life without any heroic gestures. Ralph Dodson made a far more romantic figure than Hugh. Even Scot, with his native touch of the grand manner, had more glamour for her than the younger brother.

Good old Hugh, faithful and true. She could not think of anybody she liked better.

CHAPTER XXIV

OLD DOG TRAY BARKS

JIM BUDD had picked up a new song. Much to the relief of his sore-tried wife, he occasionally monotoned it in place of the Grimes catalogue of virtues and clothing.

Vicky could hear him in the kitchen singing it now.

> "Old dog Tray ever faithful,
> Grief cannot drive him away.
> He's gentle and he's kind,
> And you'll never, never find
> A better friend than old dog Tray."

Oddly enough the words hummed themselves into Vicky's musings. She was standing before the mirror putting the finishing touches to a very attractive picture, a picture of lovely youth, warm, vital, piquant. Miss Vicky was expecting a caller, and though she hadn't any desire to dazzle this particular admirer—if he were an admirer, for she hadn't made sure of that yet—she did not choose to be so ungrateful as to neglect any of the natural

advantages with which a kind Providence had endowed her.

She murmured the fat man's refrain:

> "He's gentle and he's kind,
> And you'll never, never find
> A better friend than——"

Mrs. Budd poked her head into the room. "Hugh McClintock," she announced. "In the parlour."

"Here to see me?" asked Miss Lowell, just as though she had not known he was coming.

"I kinda gather that notion. Anyhow, he asked for you. Were you dollin' up for me an' Jim?"

"I'll be right down, tell him."

"I would, dearie. He's ce'tainly wearin' out the rim of his hat makin' it travel in circles."

After which shot Mrs. Budd puffed downstairs and read the riot act mildly to Jim for having tracked mud into her immaculate kitchen.

If Hugh was embarrassed it was because of the nature of his mission this evening. He had plenty of native dignity, but he knew nothing of the thought processes of young women going-on-eighteen. Would they take well-meant advice in the same spirit in which it was given? He did not know, but he intended to find out.

Indirectly Vicky gave him a lead. "I've just had a letter from Mollie. What do you think? Scot's going to run for secretary of state."

"Made up his mind to run, has he? Knew he was thinkin' about it. Wonder if anybody else is goin' after the Republican nomination."

"Yes," said the girl quietly.

Hugh looked a surprised question at her.

"Mr. Ralph Dodson is going to run," she continued.

He let that sink in for a moment. "Sorry," he said. "It's liable to open up the old sore."

"Do you think it will?" she asked anxiously.

"Not unless the Dodsons make it a personal fight."

"I don't think Ralph would do that."

"You know him pretty well?" He put his comment with the rising inflection.

"Yes. That is, he comes to see me." Vicky's chin was up ever so little. She sensed McClintock's hostility. "I like him."

"Do you? Can't say I do. I don't trust him."

"Do *you* know him well?"

"No, and I don't want to."

The girl laughed. "You remind me of what Charles Lamb says in one of his essays. We were reading it in school. Or maybe it was an anecdote about him the teacher told us. Anyhow, he said he didn't like a certain man. A friend asked him if he knew him. 'Of course I don't,' Lamb said. 'If I did I'd like him. That's why I don't want to know him.' Is it like that with you?"

He considered this gravely. "Maybe so. I'm prejudiced against him on account of his brother."

"But that's no fair," the girl cried quickly.

"And because of two or three things I've known him do."

"What things?" she demanded.

Hugh did not care to discuss with Vicky the man's amours. He shifted ground. "He's selfish through and through. Thinks only of himself."

The girl's eyes sparkled. "When you say that it just shows how little you know him. He's the most generous man I ever met."

"He's good lookin', and he's hail fellow enough. That's not what I mean."

"And it's not what I mean," she retorted, her temper beginning to rise. "Two or three months ago he did the bravest thing I ever saw—risked his life for hours in a caved tunnel, to save the life of a ragged little boy. Was that selfish? Was that thinking only of himself?"

"He's game. He'll go through," admitted Hugh. "I didn't mean that way."

Her stormy eyes challenged him. "Then just what *do* you mean?"

Hugh flushed. He did not find it impossible to tell her explicitly just what he did mean. It was bad enough for him to be violating the masculine instinct against exposing another man to one of the opposite sex. He could not draw a bill of particulars

about Dodson before an innocent girl. Moreover, what he had heard of the man's escapades was merely town gossip—true enough, he felt sure, but not evidence that could be held good before an ardent young advocate like Vicky.

"He's not very scrupulous some ways," he said lamely.

"What ways?"

McClintock felt himself being driven into a blind alley. He could not go on, nor could he turn back.

"I wouldn't want a sister of mine to know him too well," was the best he could do by way of explanation.

"That's merely an expression of a personal feeling," she flashed. "And since I'm not your sister it does not weigh with me. You come here and attack my friend. You say he's selfish and—unscrupulous. I ask for facts to back what you've said."

Though he had been put helplessly in the wrong, Hugh felt that he was right at bottom. Vicky had no business to have this fellow on the list of her friends. He tried to break from the logic of the position into which she had forced him by an appeal to their old friendship.

"I used to have a little partner named Vicky Lowell. We did not see much of each other, but we were tillicums. Oughtn't I to warn her when I see her going with the wrong kind of man?"

"And oughtn't I to ask you to *prove* to me he's the

wrong kind? Or must I take it for granted and give up any of my friends if you happen not to fancy them?"

"I tell you he isn't right—not right for a girl like you to know."

"You admit yourself you're prejudiced."

"Not about that. If you'll let me, I'll call his hand for a showdown. Let him prove to me he's been slandered and I'll——"

Vicky exploded. "If you dare, Hugh McClintock! Did Scot appoint you deputy guardian of me? Do you think I can't look after myself? Do you think you can come here and slander my friends——?" She broke off, white with anger.

He gave up, with a helpless lift of his hands. "I made a mistake. Sorry. I believe every word I've said, but I reckon I blundered somehow. I meant the best ever, Vicky, but—oh, well, you can't see it my way. I'll say good-evenin'."

Hugh rose. He offered his strong brown hand and with it a smile that asked for forgiveness.

She hesitated. Her anger at him was not yet spent.

From the next room came Jim Budd's wheezy refrain, tuneless and monotonous:

> "Old dog Tray ever faithful,
> Grief cannot drive him away.
> He's gentle and he's kind,
> And you'll never, never find
> A better friend than old—dog—Tray."

"Just old dog Tray," Hugh said, and his smile was a little wistful. "A faithful old blunderer, but after all an honest friend."

Vicky relented on swift impulse and gave him her hand. "All right—old dog Tray. But I warn you that you'll have grief enough to drive you away if you behave like this again."

"I'll come back even though you throw stones at me," he said, and this time his grin was gay. "Maybe I'll bark again at yore friends and maybe I won't. We'll see."

"Take my advice and don't," she warned.

"You didn't take mine."

"And that's only half of it. I'm not going to," the girl flung back, looking at him with a flash of mischief in her eyes.

"Well, I can't help that. It's good medicine." He added a suggestion: "Tell Dodson that I warned you against him if you like."

"Why would I do that?" she asked.

"I don't want to feel underhanded about it. I'd rather you did tell him."

"Well, I won't," she said with decision. "What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

"If you want me to tell you how nice a girl I think you are——"

"Now—now," she protested, laughing. "That's not what old dog Trays are for."

"Thought you asked me," he replied with deep innocence.

"First you were Mr. Goodman to me. Then you were Santa Claus. Then Mr. Hugh McClintock. Now you're old dog Tray. I wonder what you'll be next," she queried.

For a flash their eyes met before the mask fell. She drew back, startled; then decided that she had been mistaken. For in that beat of time it seemed to her that his soul had answered her question and told her what he meant to be to her next.

Of course, she had imagined it.

CHAPTER XXV

THE KILLER STRIKES

IT WAS generally recognized that the Republicans would carry the state that year. The war was still so near that it would have a determining influence on thousands of voters. The chief local interest centred in the race for the nomination of the dominant party for secretary of state.

This was due to several factors. Chief of these was the fight between two candidates of outstanding personality, a fight which rapidly developed into a bitter one. Scot McClintock was still the most picturesque figure in Nevada, though he had left behind him his wild escapades and his gay irresponsibility. The mining camps were yet full of the rumour of his adventures. In any assembly his good looks, charm, and qualities of leadership made him a marked figure. His audacity and courage fitted the time and the place. Men tremendously admired him because they saw in him what they would like to be themselves.

The character of Ralph Dodson made no appeal to men's affections. He was too cold and calcu-

lating, his ambition too ruthless. But they recognized his strength. He would travel a long way in the world.

The big mining interests supported Dodson. Scot was too much a tribune of the people to suit them. At any time he might embarrass the mine owners by some quixotic gesture inspired by his sense of justice.

Scot went out into the camps and the agricultural valleys to make a personal campaign. If he had been dealing with the voters individually he could have made a runaway race of it. But delegates to conventions, then as now, were under the influence of leaders, who in turn took orders from the men who financed the campaign. He was under a tremendous handicap because he had only an individual following to oppose a party machine.

Yet he made headway, and so fast that his opponent became alarmed. Dodson came out in the *Enterprise* with a savage attack on his rival in which he accused him of being an ex-gambler and a bawdy-house brawler. Scot kept his temper and made no counter charges. From the stump he replied that at least he had always been a square gambler. His fighting record, he said carelessly, must take care of itself.

Vicky met Ralph Dodson on the Avenue at Piodie while the campaign was at its height. She fired point blank a charge at him.

"I read what you said in the *Enterprise* about Scot."

He laughed a little, but his eyes watched her warily. "You'd think once in a while some newspaper reporter would get a story right," he said easily.

"Oh! Wasn't it true that you said it?" Her level gaze met his steadily.

"I was annoyed, and I said something. Don't remember just what. Certainly I didn't intend to insult any of your family."

"Then you'll deny it in the paper?"

"Is it quite worth while? Everybody knows what newspapers are—how they're keen to make everything one says sensational."

"If you don't deny it people will think you said it."

"We-ell, in a political campaign men get excited. It doesn't greatly matter what folks say—just part of the game, you know."

"Is it part of the game to tell lies about a good man?" she asked flatly.

He threw up his hands gaily. "I surrender at discretion. Will a note to the *Enterprise* correcting the error suit your Majesty?"

"You're not doing it for me," she told him, her dark eyes shining. "You're doing it because it's the fair thing."

"Hang the fair thing," he answered, laughing. "I'm doing it for Miss Victoria Lowell."

"I'd rather you didn't." She dimpled to a smile. "Because I'm against you and for Scot in this fight."

"Then I'll give up the race," he mocked. "I think you ought at least to be neutral."

Dodson played his hand under cover after that. He saw that McClintock was kept under a steady fire of newspaper attack and that none of it could be traced to him. No paper dared make any reference to the origin of the trouble between Colonel McClintock and the Dodsons, but hired assassins of reputation whispered evil stories in which the names of Mollie and Scot appeared. These became so numerous that at last Scot in a speech full of eloquence and fierce indignation referred to the traducers of his wife as snakes in the grass who dared not come into the open for fear of having the life trampled out of them.

The bitterness grew, became acute. Robert Dodson, still full of venom and hatred, whispered in the ears of killers. The word was passed around quietly that McClintock might be shot down any time. Friends came to warn him. They carried the word to Hugh, who dropped his business at once and joined Scot at Austin. From this time the younger man, in spite of the Colonel's good-humoured protest, travelled over the state with his brother as a lookout.

At Carson the killers struck.

Scot had addressed an enthusiastic meeting, at which he had been heckled by supporters of Dodson

and had turned upon them with such witty scorn that they had slipped out of the hall discomfited. With Hugh beside him the speaker had returned to the Ormsby House. The younger brother was putting up at the house of a friend. He left Scot in his room ready to undress.

But when the colonel felt in his waistcoat pocket for a cigar he found none. He stepped down to the barroom to get one. Baldy Green, the old stage driver, was sitting by the office stove. The two fell into talk and Scot sat down to smoke his cigar with the old-timer.

A man whom Scot did not know lounged into the office and out again. In the darkness outside he whispered to two men. One of them was the ex-mule-skinner Hopkins, a dyed-in-the-wool bad man; the other was Sam Dutch.

The hotel office had three doors. One opened from the street, a rear one led to the rooms, the third was a double swing door separating the office from the bar. Scot's chair was so placed that he faced the entrance from the street and the bar. His back was half-turned to the rear one.

The stage driver was talking. "You betcha, Colonel. If us old-timers had the say-so we'd elect you by a mile. Sure would. That slick scalawag Dodson, why he—he——"

Scot's first warning came from Baldy's consternation. His eyes popped out. They were star-

ing at some apparition in the back of the room. The words of his sentence stuck in the roof of his mouth. Almost simultaneously came the click McClintock knew from of old.

He whirled in the chair dragging at his revolver. It caught on his coat. Two bolts of lightning flamed. The crash of heavy thunder filled the room. Scot sagged in his seat, the curly head falling forward heavily on the chest. From his slack fingers the revolver dropped.

Again the guns boomed. Another jagged knife thrust of pain went through and through Scot's body.

"Got him. Got him good, Sam," an exultant voice announced hoarsely through the smoke.

A hulking figure slouched forward cautiously. The victim lay huddled in the chair motionless, both hands empty of weapons. No sign of life showed in the lax body.

"Always said I'd git him." Dutch broke into a storm of oaths. He reversed his revolver and struck the fallen head savagely with the butt.

"We'd better make a getaway," the other man said hurriedly. "This ain't no healthy place for us."

The gorilla-man struck again and broke the hammer of his revolver.

"Out this way," he said, and pushed through the swinging doors to the bar.

The heavy blows had beaten McClintock down so

that he slid from the chair. The doctor who attended him afterwards said that the effect of them was temporarily to act as a counter-shock to the bullet wounds. His senses cleared and his hand found the revolver. He was cocking it as the second assassin vanished through the swing doors.

Scot concentrated his strength and energy, focussing every ounce of power left in him to do the thing in his mind. With his left hand as a support he raised the six-shooter and fired through the swing door. Then, inch by inch, he crawled forward to the barroom entrance, shoved the door open with his shoulder, and tried again to lift the forty-five. It was not in his ebbing forces to raise the heavy weapon from the floor.

But there was no need to use it again. The mule-skinner Hopkins lay face down on the floor, arms flung wide. Scot's shot through the swing door had killed him instantly.

Baldy knelt beside his friend. "Did they get you, old-timer?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"I'm still kicking. Send for Hugh," the wounded man gasped.

Half an hour later Hugh stood beside the bedside of his brother. Scot's face was bloodless to the lips. He was suffering a good deal and was very weak. The doctor had told Hugh that he would not live till morning.

"I'm going—to—make it," Scot said faintly.

"Wire—for—Mollie. Tell her—not to—worry."

Mollie came down from Virginia. She reached Carson by daybreak. Scot was still living, still holding his own, though the doctors held out no hope of recovery. At the end of forty-eight hours he was in a high fever, but his strength was unabated. The fever broke. He came out of it weak but with the faint,indomitable smile of the unconquered on his face.

His hand pressed Mollie's softly. "It's all right, sweetheart. I'll make it sure," he promised.

The tears welled into her eyes. His courage took her by the throat and choked her, for the doctors still gave her no encouragement.

"Yes," she whispered, and tried to keep the sob out of her voice.

"What's a li'l' thing like three bullets among one perfectly good man?" he asked whimsically.

"You're not to talk, the doctor says," she reproved.

"All right. Where's Hugh?"

"He left yesterday to 'tend to some business."

"What business?" A frown of anxiety wrinkled his pale forehead.

"He didn't say."

"Where did he go?"

"I didn't ask him. He said he'd be back to-day or to-morrow, one."

Scot thought this over, still with a troubled face.

He guessed what this important business was that had called Hugh from his bedside at such a critical time. But he did not hint to Mollie his suspicion.

"When he comes back will you let me know right away, Honey? Or if he wires?"

"Yes. Now you must stop talking and take this powder."

The smile that was a messenger to carry her all his love rested in his eyes. "I'll be good, Mollie."

He took the medicine and presently fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXVI

HUGH HITS THE TRAIL

WHILE Hugh was still at the bedside of his brother he began to make arrangements for the thing he meant to do. Already he knew that Sam Dutch had left town. Word had come to him that two horsemen in a desperate hurry had clattered down the street from Doc Benton's stable. They had disappeared in the darkness. But the man who had seen them go had not recognized the companion of Dutch. Nor could he tell whether the riders had turned off Carson Street into King's Cañon road, had swung to the right along the foothills road, or had held to a straight course toward Reno.

The news of the outrage spread fast. Friends of the McClintocks poured into the Ormsby House by scores to see if there was anything they could do. Among them were the Governor, a Justice of the Supreme Court, half-a-dozen state senators and representatives, and the sheriff of the county.

It was characteristic of Hugh that even in the anguish he felt at seeing his brother stricken from

lusty health by the bullets of assassins his mind worked with orderly precision. When he thought of the murderers a cold, deadly anger possessed him, but if possible he meant his vengeance to come within the law.

"There's one thing you can do, Phil," he said to the sheriff. "Swear me in as a special deputy. I'm goin' out to get Dutch."

"To bring him back here, you mean?" asked the officer.

McClintock's eyes were inscrutable. "Of course."

"Now, looky here, son, that's our job," the sheriff remonstrated. "I'm gonna git that fellow. He's run on the rope too long. You stay right here with Scot."

"No. I want Dutch. He's mine. Hands off till I can leave Scot, Phil."

The sheriff argued, but he could not move the grim-faced man from his purpose. At last he gave way with a shrug of his shoulders. A wilful man must have his way.

"All right, son, I'll swear you in if you'll promise to bring Dutch back to Carson providin' you git him."

"I promise that."

"Alive," the sheriff added.

"Alive," agreed Hugh, meeting him eye to eye.

Baldy Green showed his teeth in a mirthless grin. "A few of us here in town'll guarantee that if you bring him alive he won't go away alive."

The officer turned on him angrily. "That's a fine way to talk, Baldy. You hold yore lines tighter. Monkey with my prisoner an' I'll show you a scatter gun that throws buckshot all over Carson."

Meanwhile Hugh kept the wires hot with messages. He telegraphed friends at Virginia, Reno, Piodie, and Genoa, asking for news of the fugitives. His suspicion fastened on Robert Dodson as the man who was riding with Dutch. He knew the man had been in town earlier in the day, and he could not through his friends locate him here now. The night travellers might make for Virginia, where Dutch could lie hidden in one of the Dodson mines till the excitement was past. Or they might be making for Genoa with the intention of crossing the Sierras to California. More likely still they were headed for Piodie, where the sheriff, the law machinery, and the town bad men were all friendly to the Dodson interests. So Hugh reasoned it out.

The sheriff shook his head. "Don't look to me like Dodson would mix himself up with Dutch now. Maybe he hired him to do this killing. I don't say he did. I don't know. But it ain't reasonable that he'd give himself away by ridin' hellamile outa town with him."

"Ralph Dodson wouldn't, but you can't tell what his brother might do. My notion is he didn't intend to go, but afterwards lost his nerve and wouldn't stick it out here alone."

"That'd be like Bob Dodson," Baldy confirmed. "He's got a sure enough rabbit heart."

None of the answers to his telegrams brought Hugh the message he hoped for. The fugitives had not been seen at Virginia, Genoa, or Reno, though it was quite possible they might have reached or passed through any of these places unnoticed. He decided to play what would nowadays be called a hunch. The natural place for them to go was Piodie, and it was there he meant to look for them.

The doctors gave him no hope for Scot, but they now believed that his remarkable vitality would keep him alive several days. Hugh arranged to keep in touch with Baldy Green by wire. Now that the railroad was in operation he could get back to town within a few hours if an emergency call came for him.

He rode down to Reno and there boarded the Overland. A couple of hours later he left it at a small way station and engaged a saddle horse. He guessed that if the fugitives had gone to Piodie they would leave watchers to report on any strangers who might come to town. Therefore, four miles out of Piodie he left the road, took a cow trail that swung round Bald Knob, and dropped down a little gulch that led to the back of the Pony Express Corral, and under cover of dusk slipped into the stable.

Byers was there alone. "How's Scot?" he asked.

"Bad," said Hugh, and his haggard face twitched.

"Doctor don't think he'll make it. What about Dutch?"

"Got in last night."

"Dodson with him?"

The small man nodded. He was always parsimonious of words.

"Know where he is now?"

"At the Katie Brackett. Rode right out there."

Hugh knew that this meant his enemies were playing it safe. The Katie Brackett was owned and controlled by the Dodsons. Here they were on home territory, surrounded by adherents. If a sheriff's posse appeared on the road leading to the mine Dutch would be safely underground in one of the levels long before it reached the shaft house. There he would be as secure as a needle in a haystack. Even if the sheriff elected to search the mine, the bad man could play hide and seek with the posse in a hundred stopes, drifts, and crosscuts.

"Ralph Dodson in town?"

"No. Virginia."

This was one piece of good news. With the younger mine owner absent he would have one less enemy to contend with, and the most dangerous of the three. For Ralph was game, audacious, and brainy. It would hardly have been possible to get the killer out of Piodie with young Dodson running the campaign for him.

"I'm goin' up after him," Hugh said quietly.

"With that gang round him?"

"Maybe I'll catch him alone."

"And maybe not." Byers stepped to the wall and took down from a peg a belt to which was attached a revolver. He strapped on the belt.

"No, Dan," Hugh told him. "I'm playin' a lone hand. My only chance is to lie low and surprise Dutch before he knows I'm within a hundred miles."

"Hmp! What if he surprises you?"

"I'll be Number Sixteen. But he won't. I'm goin' to take him back to Carson."

There was a sound of feet moving at a shuffling run. A man burst through the doorway and stopped at sight of them. The runner was Jim Budd. For a few moments he stood panting, unable to find his breath for speech.

"What's up, Jim?" asked Hugh.

The fat man wheezed out an answer. "H-hell to pay! The Katie Brackett's afire, an' the day shift's down in her, caught in a drift."

CHAPTER XXVII

TRAPPED

AS THE three friends hurried up Pine Nut Gulch toward the Katie Brackett the youngest of them reflected that the method of approach had been made smooth for him. It was not now necessary for him to skulk up through the sage. The whole town was on its way to the scene of the disaster. A stream of people was headed for the mine. Nimble boys passed them on the run. Less active citizens they overtook and left behind. The sounds of voices, of movements of many people, came to them through the darkness.

Hugh still carried his sawed-off shotgun. He might need it. He might not. He realized that for the moment his vengeance must take second place. The common thought and effort of Piodie must centre on the business of saving the poor fellows trapped in that fiery furnace six hundred feet below ground.

The superintendent of the mine was calling for volunteer rescuers just as Hugh and Dan reached

the shaft house. McClintock hid his shotgun under a pile of lumber and stepped forward. The cage was a double decker. There was a rush of men to get on the lower floor. They knew well enough the danger that faced them, but it is a risk a brave miner is always willing to take for the lives of doomed companions.

"Hold on! Get back there. Don't crowd!" ordered the superintendent. "No married man can go. You, Finlay—and Trelawney—and Big Bill. That makes six. All right."

The lower compartment dropped and the second level was even with the ground. The superintendent stepped into the cage. Byers crowded in next. Budd, puffing hard, pushed close. With an elbow driven hard into his midriff Hugh thrust him back. "Don't you hear? No married men wanted, Jim."

McClintock vaulted over the edge of the cage and dropped into it.

A big Ayrshire mucker shouted at the superintendent. "An' when did ye divorce your wife an' twa weans, boss?"

"I've got to go, Sandy. It's my job," the mine boss called back. "That's all. No room for more. Jam that gate shut."

The engineer moved a lever and the bucket dropped into the darkness. Every few seconds there was a flash of light as the cage passed a station. Except for that the darkness was dense.

Hugh heard someone beside him say, "I hear Dodson's caught in a drift."

Carstairs, the superintendent, answered: "Yes. Dutch is with him. They went to look at that new vein we struck yesterday."

No accident contains more terrible possibilities than a fire in a mine. Flame and gas pursue the trapped victims as they fly. Cut off from the shaft, buried hundreds of feet in the ground, the miners run the risk of being asphyxiated, burned, or blown up in an explosion of released gases.

The shaft, the drifts, the crosscuts, and the tunnels all act as flues to suck the flames into them. At Piodie, as at Virginia City, the danger was intensified by the great quantity of fuel with which these natural chimneys were lined. In the Katie Brackett whole forests were buried. Every drift and tunnel was braced with timbers. Scores of chutes, with vertical winzes, all made of wood, led from one level to another. The ore chambers were honeycombed with square sets of timber mortised together and wedged against the rock walls and roof. Upon each set floors of heavy planking were laid. In these were trap doors, through which steps ran leading from the lower level to the one above.

The fire was in the north drift. Carstairs led the men forward cautiously. Already their eyes were inflamed from the smoke that rolled out at them. As they moved forward heat waves struck them.

The rock walls were so hot that the rescuers could with difficulty keep going.

Hugh was at the nozzle of the hose they were dragging. He kept a stream playing on the rock and the charred timber. Presently he fell back, overcome by the intense heat, and Carstairs took his place. Byers succeeded the superintendent at the apex of the attack.

Steam, sulphur, fumes, and gas released from the minerals swept the rescuers back. The air was so foul that the workers could not breathe it without collapsing. An air pipe was led in from the main blower above, and the volunteers renewed their efforts.

At times the swirling smoke was too much for them. It either drove them to the shaft or it forced them to lie with their faces close to the ground where the air was purer. Farther down the tunnel they could see red tongues of flame licking at them. The roar of the fire as it leaped forward was far more appalling than that of any wild beast could have been.

The faces of the firemen were smoke-blackened and grimy. Already several had collapsed from the intense heat. These were helped back to the shaft and sent up. Others came down to take their places.

Hugh's eyebrows crisped from the heat. The men were all naked from the waist up. Below this they wore only cotton overalls and boots. These were

licked to a char thin and fragile as paper. The skin peeled from Hugh's body in flakes where anything touched it.

From above came an ominous sound.

"Back," ordered Carstairs.

The roof came down, an avalanche of dirt and rock and timber. So close was McClintock to it that the air shock almost knocked him down.

Before the dust had settled Carstairs sent his sappers at the job of clearing out and timbering the tunnel.

Steadily the rescuers gained ground. Every few minutes they relayed each other. Each man knew that his position was one of great danger. The fire might reach the shaft and cut them off from above. A cave of rock might release gases which might kill either by explosion or asphyxiation. A change of draught might fling a great tongue of fire at them and wipe the whole party out in a few seconds. Yet the work went on, hour after hour, steadily and without ceasing. For somewhere in one of the crosscuts which they were approaching, a group of haggard, anxious men were awaiting rescue, unless the fire had already snuffed out their lives.

"The crosscut's just ahead," Carstairs announced.

Byers was at the nozzle. The little man had stuck it out gamely. Only four of the original party were still working. The others had been relieved and sent to the surface.

McClintock had just returned from the shaft where he had been with a man overcome by the heat. He was for the moment the freshest man in the group.

"Two volunteers to search the crosscut while the rest hold back the fire," called Carstairs.

"I'll go," said a Maine lumberjack.

"Same here," added Hugh.

They waited, watching for a chance to plunge into the side tunnel when the fire was momentarily low.

"Now," said McClintock, and he dived at the opening in the wall.

The lumberjack followed him. So intense was the heat at the entrance to the crosscut that a little pool of water on the rock floor was boiling angrily. As they pushed deeper into it the heat decreased.

Hugh shouted. A voice answered his call.

He moved forward and presently stumbled over a body.

"How many in here?" he asked.

"Eleven."

"Where are the others?"

"Dead," came the answer. "Cut off by fire damp before we reached the crosscut."

"All of you able to travel?"

"Yes."

Hugh heard the sound of footsteps stumbling toward him. Men came abreast of him and went past. He counted them—eleven. Then he stooped and picked up the body at his feet. In another

minute he was staggering into the drift with his burden.

The fire fighters fell back past the charred timbers and the hot rocks of the wall.

"You're through, boys," Carstairs said. "I'll send a fresh crew in to blast down the mouth of the drift and build a bulkhead against the fire. Then we'll close the shaft and let 'er die down for lack of air."

The first thing Hugh did when he reached the foot of the shaft was to find the revolver he had hidden beneath a car; the next was to look over the rescued men for the one he wanted. He found him, standing beside Robert Dodson close to the cage. The mine owner was sobbing with the strain he had undergone. His nerve had gone. The big hulking figure at his back was Sam Dutch.

Hugh kept in the background. He did not want to be recognized just yet. Meanwhile, he slipped into his trousers, shirt, and coat. In the pocket of his coat was something that jingled when he accidentally touched the wall.

The rescued men were in much better condition than the ones who had fought the fire to save them. They had reached the precarious safety of the cross-cut in time to avail themselves of its comparatively fresh air. The volunteers were worn out, fagged, and burned to a toast. Some of them had inhaled gases and smoke that would enfeeble their lungs for

months. They moved like automatons, their energy gone, their strength exhausted.

The cage came down and the men began to pile in. Hugh was standing close behind a huge man whom his eyes never left. He pushed into the lower level of the cage after him.

The car shot upward. Hugh drew something from his pocket. In the darkness his hand moved gently to and fro. It found what it was seeking. There was a click, a second click, a furious, raucous oath of rage like the bellow of a maddened bull elephant. Hugh had slipped handcuffs on the thick wrists of Dutch and locked them.

His thumb jammed hard into the spine of the desperado. "Steady in the boat," he murmured. "This gun's liable to spill sudden."

The car rose into the fresh daylight of the young morning.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"AS GOOD AS THE WHEAT"

THROUGH the crowd at the mouth of the mine word flashed that the cage was coming up. All night they had waited there, the wives and children of the imprisoned miners, the residents of Piodie who knew one or another of the men caught in the raging inferno below. The women and the little ones had wept themselves dry of tears long since. They stood now with taut nerves, eyes glued to the cage as it swept into sight.

Someone started a cheer as the first of the rescued men stepped out to the platform. A wail of anguish rose above it and killed the cheer. It came from a young wife with a shawl over her head. She had asked a question of one of the men and learned that her husband was dead.

The crowd pressed close to those who had come up from the fire. A woman gave a sob of joy and fell into the arms of a grimy Cousin Jack. Another caught a glimpse of her husband's face and fainted.

In the excitement two men pushed through the

crowd toward a pile of lumber. The one in front moved with sullen reluctance. Only the pressure against his back kept him going. Nobody noticed that he was handcuffed.

From underneath the lumber pile the second man drew a sawed-off shotgun.

"We'll be movin' down to town," he told his captive.

Dutch shouted one word, "Dodson."

The mine owner swung round, and at the first glance understood the situation. He turned pale and stepped behind Carstairs. Not for a moment did he doubt that McClintock had come to kill Dutch. Would he make a clean sweep of it and shoot him, too? Convicted of guilt, he crouched behind his superintendent shaking like an aspen.

"Don't let him kill me," he begged.

Hugh spoke, his voice cold and hard. "I'm not on the shoot to-day, Dodson—unless you force my hand, you black-hearted murderer. I'm here to take Dutch back to Carson with me. The yellow wolf shot my brother in the back."

"No such thing. I got him in a fair fight," blustered Dutch. "An' I ain't goin' to Carson with you, either."

"You're going, *dead or alive*." McClintock's face and voice were as inexorable as the day of judgment.

"He's aimin' to take me there to be killed," Dutch cried out. "You boys won't stand for that."

He named two or three of the men with whom he consorted, picking them out of the crowd.

"Sure we won't." A gunman stepped forward briskly. "You can't pull that over here, McClintock. You don't own this camp, an' you can't play chief here."

Two men lined up with Hugh, one on each side of him. The man on his right was a whale of a fat man. Deftly he slid McClintock's revolver from its holster. The second ally was a small wiry fellow. From a grimy blackened face keen eyes peered intently.

The fat man spoke. "Don't run on the rope, Sloan. We're with the kid on this. He's a deputy sheriff, an' it'll sure be 'Let's gather at the river' for some of you anxious gents if you overplay yore hand."

Sloan hesitated. He could not very well look round to see whether the gang of which he was one were present in numbers, and, if so, whether they would support him. He knew these three men of old. They belonged to the pony express outfit, as hard riding and fast shooting a group of men as the West has known. It was certain that Dutch could not be rescued without a fight, and Sloan was hardly in a position to call for a showdown. He was game enough. With McClintock alone he would have taken a chance. But the three of them were too many for him.

The sheriff of the county saved his face. He bustled forward.

"Tut, tut! What's all this?" he asked fussily. "There's good law in this town, lots of it. No need of gun plays. If Mr. Dutch is wanted, there's a right an' proper way to get him, but that way ain't at the point of a gun."

"McClintock's a deputy sheriff," put in Budd.

There was rivalry between him and the sheriff. Budd was a candidate for the party nomination at the coming primaries. The wise politicians admitted that even with the Dodsons against him the fat man had a chance.

"You'd oughta know better'n that, Budd, an' you a candidate for sheriff," the officer reproved. "Say he is a deputy. He can't go cavortin' round all over Nevada, California, and Utah arrestin' any one he's a mind to. Where's his warrant? Whyn't he come to me with it like a reasonable man would—that is, if he's got one."

With his left hand Hugh felt in his pocket and produced a warrant. He handed it to the sheriff. That gentleman ran his eye over it. He returned it.

"Good only in Ormsby County," he snapped. "What arrestin' is done here I do—leastways, at present," he added with a sarcastic grin at Budd.

The fat man was caught. He knew nothing about the technicalities of arrests. What the sheriff said might or might not be true. He tried a bluff.

"This here's an extra-territorial warrant that runs ex judicio," he explained largely.

"That so?" asked the sheriff ironically. "Well, it sure don't hold water here. Bad men can't get on the prod with me. No, siree!"

The cage had descended to bring up a second load of miners. Meanwhile, the interest of the crowd centred on the dispute that had arisen. Those on the outskirts pressed forward, eager to hear what was being said. Sloan had fallen back and was whispering in the ears of a few choice spirits.

Hugh spoke out straight and strong. His words were not for the sheriff, but for the judgment of the unbiased public.

"I came here as an officer with a warrant to get this man. Three days ago he shot down from behind the best man in Nevada, Scot McClintock. Most of you know my brother, a first-class citizen and soldier. He ran this scalawag out of Virginia, and he made the mistake of not killin' him right then. I've made that same mistake myself three times. Yet yore sheriff says I'm a bad man because I come here to arrest a fifteen-times murderer. How about that, boys?"

The crowd was with Hugh at once. The Dodsons controlled the camp. A good many of these men were dependent upon them financially. But even Ralph Dodson was hardly popular. As for Dutch, their camp bully, everybody feared him and nobody

trusted him. He was so confirmed a gunman that at any moment while in drink he might slay any of them.

The sheriff had not volunteered to go down into the mine with one of the rescue parties; nor had Sloan or any of his cronies. But this young fellow with the fire-blackened face and hands, whose haggard eyes looked out with such quiet grim resolution, had gone into that hell below to save their friends. Byers, the man on his left, had been another of the rescuers. The fat man had volunteered three times and been rejected.

"His warrant goes in Piodie," someone shouted.

"Sure does," echoed another voice.

"Not on yore tintype," retorted the sheriff. "Ormsby County don't run our affairs. Not none."

The Maine lumberjack lined up beside Hugh, an axe shaft in his hand. He had observed that Dodson and Sloan were gathering the camp toughs for a rescue.

"His warrant's good with me—good as the wheat," the big woodsman said. "He made it good, boys, when he stood up to that hose nozzle down below and stuck there while he baked. He made it good again when he went in to the crosscut where our friends were trapped."

Sloan and his crowd moved forward. One of them spoke to the sheriff. "If you want to swear in some deputies to enforce the law, Dick, why, we're right here handy."

From out of the crowd a girl darted, light as a deer. She stood directly in front of Hugh, face to face with the gunmen of the camp. A warm colour breathed in her cheeks. Her dark eyes flashed with indignation.

"Don't you touch him. Don't you dare touch him," she cried. "It was my brother this—this villain killed. He did shoot him from behind. I've had a letter. It was murder."

A murmur of resentment passed like a wave through the crowd. They knew the slim young school teacher told the truth.

"Don't I know?" she went on ardently, beautiful in her young unconsciousness of self as a flaming flower. "Wasn't I there when he tried to kill Hugh here—and Hugh frozen from the blizzard so that he couldn't lift a hand to help himself? Oh, he's—he's a terrible man."

"He is that," an Irishwoman's voice lifted. "But glory be, there's wan man not afraid to comb his whiskers for him. An' it's a brave colleen y'are to spake up for your fine young man like that."

A roar of approval went up into the air. Men surged forward, and women, too, to express their gratitude by standing between this young man and the Dodson faction. Vicky, rosy with embarrassment, vanished in the crowd.

"I reckon you don't get a chance to use yore scatter gun this trip," Budd said with a grin. "Pros-

pects look bilious for this killer you got rounded up. Sure do. I never did see such a son-of-a-gun as you, Kid. Me, I'd 'a' bet an ounce of gold against a dollar Mex you never would 'a' walked into Piodie an' took Sam Dutch out. But that there miracle is what you're gonna pull off, looks like."

"Went right down into the Katie Brackett after him," chuckled Byers. "Brought him from that hell hole with the cuffs on him."

"Sho! It's you boys that helped me out," said Hugh. "And I haven't got him to Carson yet, anyhow. Sloan won't give up without makin' a try to get Dutch from me."

Evidently the gunmen knew better than to challenge public opinion at present. They drew off to the mine boarding house and left Hugh free to return to Piodie with his prisoner.

McClintock thanked the lumberjack and others who had come to his aid, and started down the gulch, accompanied by a straggling guard of townspeople returning to their homes for breakfast after a long and anxious night.

Dutch shambled in front of him through the sage. After a period of violent cursing he had fallen into a savage and vindictive silence. He, too, believed that his allies would not desert him without a fight.

Beneath the superficial needs of the moment Hugh's thoughts were of Vicky. He had all the average man's healthy reluctance at being defended

by a woman, but deeper than this was his admiration for the spirit of the girl. He had never seen anything lovelier, more challenging, than the slender girl glowing with passionate indignation on his behalf. She had looked like a picture he had seen of Joan of Arc standing before the French army, her sword outflung and her young body clad in shining armour.

CHAPTER XXIX

VICKY FINDS A WAY

VICKY, in her bedroom at Mrs. Budd's, flogged herself with a whip of scorn. She had acted on imperative impulse, just as she used to do when she was a little girl. Her cheeks flamed again when she recalled what the Irishwoman had said. Of course! Everybody would think she had done it because she was in love with Hugh McClintock.

Savagely she mocked her own heroics. She had behaved ridiculously. There was no excuse for her at all. Probably Hugh, too, was laughing at her or else flattering himself that he had made a conquest. Her pride rebelled. And yet—when she saw again in imagination the group of gunmen under Sloan moving forward to attack, she knew that she would probably do the same thing a second time, given the same circumstances.

Mrs. Budd knocked on the door. "Breakfast ready, deary."

Miss Lowell became aware suddenly that she was very hungry. But she did not want to meet Jim

Budd. He would probably start teasing her, and if he did she would certainly lose her temper. She fibbed.

"I'm not hungry yet. If you don't mind I'll come down and get a bite out of the pantry later."

"Mr. McClintock is here. He wants to thank you," the landlady said gently.

Hugh McClintock was the last man in the world that Vicky wanted to see just now, but she would not for a month's salary have let him know it.

"He needn't trouble, I'm sure," she said carelessly. "But I'll be down presently."

She came to breakfast stormy-eyed. Hugh rose to meet her from his seat next the door. He offered his hand.

For a fraction of a second she looked at it, apparently surprised. It was as though she said, a little disdainfully, "What's the use of all this fuss about nothing?" Then her hand met his.

He said, in a low voice, "Old dog Tray's mighty grateful, Vicky."

But he spoke with a smile, words unstressed. She drew a breath of relief. Hugh understood, anyhow. He was not imagining any foolishness.

"Oh, I didn't want them to take that villain from you," she explained. "I'll not be satisfied till he's hanged. What have you heard about Scot?"

"A telegram last night and one this mo'ning. He's still holdin' his own, the doctors say. But they're

not hopeful. One of the bullets went into his intestines."

Tears brimmed her eyes. "Isn't it dreadful—when people are happy, like Scot and Mollie, that——"

He nodded, his throat tightening.

"Don't let these buckwheats get cold," Mrs. Budd said cheerfully, bustling in with a hot plateful.

Jim Budd was sitting in the kitchen guarding the prisoner, but Byers, Hugh, and Vicky, with an occasional word from Mrs. Budd, discussed plans for getting Dutch to Carson.

Both Hugh and Byers were exhausted. The night through which they had just come had been a terrible one. Their bodies from which the skin peeled in flakes at several points of contact with their clothes, were a torment to them. Eyebrows, eyelashes, and some of the front hair had crisped away. The faces of both of them were fire-red, and from sunken sockets blear-eyed old age gazed listlessly. They needed sleep certainly, medical attention possibly.

The girl's dark eyes softened as she looked at them. They had fought a good fight, just as a matter of course and all in the day's work. She had been down a mine. Her imagination filled in the horrors of the fearful hours in that hell's cauldron from which they had at last dragged the imprisoned miners.

"Let me send for Doctor Rogers," she said gently.

"You feelin' sick, Vicky?" Hugh asked with a flare of humour.

"I mean, to look at you and Mr. Byers."

"We ain't much to look at right now. I expect he'd rather see us some time when we're not so dog tired. Find us more entertainin'."

"Then you'd better go upstairs and sleep. Mr. Budd says he'll watch your prisoner till night."

"And what then?" asked Hugh. "We can't just saddle up and hit the trail for Carson. Never in the world get there. By this time they've wired to Ralph Dodson. He's on the job at the other end of the line."

"What makes you think so?" Vicky asked.

"Because Bob Dodson hired Dutch to shoot Scot. He showed it when he lit out with him in the middle of the night. Dodson has got to stand by Dutch to keep him from telling all he knows. He's sure sent a hurry-up call for help to brother Ralph. Their play is to prevent me from reaching Carson with Dutch a prisoner. Once there, with feeling in the town high against him, the killer would be liable to tell who was back of the shooting. He'd do it out of revenge because he had not been rescued."

"I can telegraph to Carson for help and have friends come and meet you."

"That would mean a pitched battle. Can't have that."

"Oh, well, you go to bed and sleep," Vicky said imperatively. "We can decide later about how you're going to reach Carson."

Hugh nodded. "You'll have me wakened if any word comes about Scot?"

"Of course."

Within a few minutes both men, and Dutch, too, were sound asleep. It was late in the afternoon when Mrs. Budd knocked on Hugh's door to awaken him.

He found Vicky waiting for him in the sitting room.

"You look better," she said.

"I feel a hundred years younger," he answered. "Any news about Scot?"

"No."

"I'll leave to-night. Can't stay away any longer."

"Yes. That would be best."

"Is the house watched?"

"Yes."

"Can't help it. I'll go soon as I've eaten."

"I'm going, too," she told him. "I ought to be with Mollie."

"You come to-morrow—not to-day. There may be trouble."

"No, there won't be any trouble—and I'm going with you," she answered. There was a queer little smile on her face, a smile of friendly mockery.

"I'm not going alone, you know," he explained. "Dutch travels with me."

"Then there'll be three of us." She stepped to the

kitchen door, but before she opened it mirth bubbled in her face and broke to laughter. "Come in, Mr. Dutch. We start on a long journey about dusk."

Dutch shuffled into the room—at least the man was Dutch in walk, in manner, dress, and beard. Hugh looked at him again, and still a third time, before he discovered that this was Jim Budd made up for the part of the desperado.

The young man's puzzled eyes asked a question of Vicky.

"We three are going after supper," she explained. "Their lookout is over at Schmidt's blacksmith shop. Mr. Budd will seem to have his hands tied. Of course he'll think it's your prisoner."

"If Jim doesn't begin to tell him all about old Grimes," McClintock said drily.

"Yes, you mustn't sing, Mr. Budd. You know there aren't many voices like yours," the girl replied, laughing. "He'll notify his friends, and they'll follow us. Probably they'll telegraph ahead that we're coming. Very likely a welcome party will come to meet us. By that time Mr. Budd will be Mr. Budd, and somebody will be sold."

"Good enough," agreed Hugh. "But haven't you forgot one small detail? The real Dutch has got to go to Carson. That's what I came here for—to get him."

"He'll go. As soon as the sheriff's posse has clattered past after us, Mr. Byers and your prisoner will

take a very quiet walk up the gulch and round Bald Knob. Horses are waiting there somewhere; I don't know just where. Your friend the lumberjack with the axe handle took them. He and Mr. Byers will ride across the hills with the prisoner to Carson."

Hugh looked at the eager, vital girl with frank admiration. "You're a wonder, Vicky, one sure enough whirlwind when you get going. Sounds reasonable—if Dodson's crowd let us get goin' as you figure they will. But you can't tell. They may stop us right when we start up the cañon. Then they'll know Jim here isn't Dutch, and the fat will certainly be in the fire."

"No, Hugh, we've had a message from a friend in the enemy's camp."

"Yes?"

"From Irish Tom."

"Carberry?"

"Yes. At least, we think it's from him. One of my little boys brought me a note. Here it is."

Hugh read the words scribbled on a sheet of torn note paper.

Tell McClintock to look out for trouble near Bell's Camp. He'll be caught between two fires if he tries to take Dutch with him.

A Friend.

"What makes you think Carberry wrote this?" asked Hugh.

"Ned described the man who gave it to him,"

Budd explained. "He's sure a ringer for Carberry—even to that red shirt he wears."

"Might be Tom," agreed Hugh. "My vote saved his life from the vigilantes at Aurora. Tom's not such a bad sort."

"You see we're safe till we reach Bell's Camp," interpreted Vicky. "The sheriff and the gunmen he appoints as deputies will follow behind us and we'll be driven into the arms of those who come to meet us. That's the plan."

"Yes—if Irish Tom wrote this and it's not a trap."

"Oh, well, beggars can't be choosers," she cried impatiently. "I don't suppose you have a better way to suggest."

"Only in one particular, Vicky. No need of you going. There might be shooting. I don't say there will, but there might be."

"Fiddlesticks! There won't be, not if I'm there. Think I don't know Ralph Dodson?"

Budd came unexpectedly to her aid. "Miss Lowell's sure right, Hugh. You *know* if she's with us there won't be no gun-play."

Hugh hesitated. What his friends said was true enough. The West, even at its worst, was very careful of its good women. No weapons would be used in the presence of Victoria Lowell. But there was in him an extreme reluctance to use her skirts as a protection behind which to hide. He wanted to

play his own hand and take Dutch out openly in the face of opposition.

Yet he knew this was not possible. Vicky had worked out a feasible plan of operations. It was only fair to give it a tryout.

"All right," he conceded rather ungraciously. "Have it yore own way, good people. Vicky, you're road boss of this outfit. Go to it. When do we start, did you say?"

Vicky dimpled with delight. "Right after supper."

CHAPTER XXX

AT BELL'S CAMP

A BOY rode up the street leading two saddled horses. He stopped in front of the Budd house, from which three persons emerged in answer to his shrill whistle. The lookout in the shadow of Schmidt's blacksmith shop leaned forward to peer into the failing light. First came a huge, shambling man, hairy and bearded, his hands tied together in front of him. At his heels walked a straight lithe figure recognized instantly by the watcher as McClintock. The deputy carried a revolver. A young woman in riding dress brought up the rear.

McClintock handed his revolver to the lady after he had helped her mount. He adjusted the stirrups of all the saddles. To the watcher up the street it seemed that all his movements were hurried and furtive. Plainly the travellers wanted to be gone.

No sooner had they started into the cañon than the lookout was off to make his report. Inside of five minutes a party of four horsemen swung round the bend of the road into the gorge.

Half a mile up the cañon Hugh stopped to free Budd's hands. This done, he waited a moment to listen. On the night breeze came faintly the ring of a horse's hoof on granite.

"Our anxious friends aren't losin' any time," he said, grinning.

"You're damn whistlin'," agreed Bud. "Beg pardon, ma'am. I done forgot you was here. I meant to say he was doggoned right."

From the cañon they emerged into a rough country of basaltic rocks twisted and misshapen. Once a rabbit scurried from almost under the feet of Vicky's horse. The scent of the sage was strong in her nostrils, and the taste of alkali in her throat.

But the girl was happy. This night ride, with her face against the wind and the eternal stars above, made the blood in her body sing. She vibrated with excitement. The rapid motion, the knowledge of the armed pursuit, the touch of peril in the situation, appealed to all the adventure zest in her heart. As they rode knee to knee through the darkness the movements of the horses occasionally pushed her and Hugh into contact. A new delightful thrill flamed through her. Shyly she looked at him and was glad of the night. Her eyes were too bright and her cheeks too hot to be seen even by old dog Tray.

Old dog Tray! She knew the metaphor was inept. Jim Budd, now, was a good old dog Tray, but not this

light-stepping young Apollo who somehow contrived to be the partner of all the dramatic moments in her life. She would never forget him as he had faced Sloan and his gang at the mouth of the pit from which he had come with all the anguish of the night vritten on his face. There had been something indomitable in his gesture, a spark in the sunken eye struck from the soul of a man quite sure of himself. Vicky knew—and knew it with a strange reluctant dread—that her feelings would insist on a retrial of the case of Hugh McClintock at the bar of her judgment. Vaguely she divined that the true romance is not of outward trappings but straight from the heart of life.

The miles of their journey stole the hours. It was far past midnight when Hugh turned to Vicky with a smile not free from anxiety.

"Bell's Camp just ahead," he said. "Don't make any mistake. When we're ordered to halt, all our hands go straight up in the air."

He wished now that he had not let the girl come with them. It had been easy to reason in the light of day that she would be quite safe. But Dodson did not know she was in the party. Suppose someone got excited and fired in the darkness. Hugh's imagination began to conjure disaster.

But the affair worked out quite simply. From behind rocks on both sides of the road men rose suddenly and covered the party with rifles.

"Stick 'em up. Reach for the sky," a voice ordered curtly.

Six hands went up instantly, almost as though they had been waiting for the cue.

"You may pull yours down, Dutch," the voice went on.

Hugh spoke suavely: "Must be some mistake, gentlemen. Mr. Dutch isn't with us."

"Not with you! What's the use of lying? Speak up, Dutch."

"If you're meanin' me, my name's Budd—Jim Budd from Piodie," spoke up the fat man.

The challenger stepped close and stared up at his face. "Where's Dutch? What have you done with him?" he demanded.

"Why, we left him at Piodie. The sheriff didn't want us to bring him," Budd said with bland innocence, grinning down at his questioner. "Is this here a hold-up, or what?"

"One of 'em's a girl," cried another of the armed men in sharp surprise.

"A girl!"

Vicky spoke now. "Isn't that Mr. Dodson—Mr. Ralph Dodson?" she asked quietly.

"Miss Lowell! What are you doing here?"

"I might ask that about you, Mr. Dodson," she retorted. "I'm going with Mr. McClintock and Mr. Budd to Carson. Haven't you heard that two ruffians tried to murder Colonel McClintock?"

Her voice rang out like a bell. It accused him, if not of conspiracy to murder, at least of aiding and abetting the escape of the murderer.

After just an instant's hesitation Dodson spoke gravely. "Yes, I've heard, Miss Lowell. Believe me, I have been greatly distressed. If there's anything I can do——"

"You can help us bring to justice the desperado who escaped," she cried hotly.

Dodson chose his words with care. He knew they were likely to be reported by some of his men to the gang at Piodie. "If someone got into a quarrel with Colonel McClintock and——"

"They didn't get into a quarrel with him," Vicky flung out indignantly. "They crept up behind him and shot him down while he wasn't looking. Even rattlesnakes give warning. These reptiles didn't."

"I really don't know the facts, Miss Lowell. But if you're correctly informed certainly——"

"Oh, if—if—if," exploded the girl. "Just words. The attack on Scot was the most dastardly, cowardly cruel thing I ever heard of. The men who did it and those who had it done are as bad as red Indians." Her eyes stabbed into him. They were filled with the passionate intolerance of youth.

"Well, I can't talk about that because I don't know anything about it," Dodson said, his surface smile working. "We're here under orders from the sheriff at Piodie. He sent us word that someone

was attempting illegally to abduct Sam Dutch. There seems to be some mistake."

"So that it remains for you to apologize for having drawn guns on us," Vicky said tartly. "Then we'll move on."

Dodson flushed. "I'm certainly sorry if we alarmed you, Miss Lowell. Under the circumstances it couldn't be helped. If we had known you were out riding with friends——" He stopped, leaving his sarcastic sentence suspended in air.

"Much obliged, Mr. Dodson," she answered angrily. "I suppose you felt you had to say that pleasant farewell remark. I wouldn't be out riding with friends at this time of night, as you would have put it if you had the courage, if your friends hadn't laid in wait to kill my brother Thursday evening."

Hugh spoke quietly and evenly. "We'll say good-night, Mr. Dodson, that is, if you're quite satisfied we're not concealing Mr. Dutch about our persons."

Dodson fell back with a wave of his hand. The rifles were lowered. In a moment the travellers were on their way. The mine owner looked after them with a frown on his brow. He was not satisfied. He believed he had been tricked, but for the life of him he could not tell how.

Budd was the first of the three to speak. "You got us out of that fine, Miss Lowell. Had him busy explainin' why-for the whole time."

But Vicky was not willing to leave the case as it stood. She was annoyed at herself. Yet her judgment defended her course.

"I acted like a vixen," she said. "But I wanted to put him on the defence. The easiest way to meet an attack is to attack first, Scot once told me. So I tried to ride roughshod over him so that he wouldn't dare take us back to Piodie with him."

"He couldn't fight Miss Victoria Lowell," Hugh told her, smiling. "If it hadn't been for you he ce'tainly would have taken us to Piodie. But you had him right. He couldn't do a thing but let us go. We're much obliged to you."

Presently, out of the darkness, while Budd was riding a few yards ahead of them, Vicky's voice came with unwonted humility:

"You were right, Hugh, and I was wrong. I heard something about him the other day. Mrs. Budd told me, and it came direct. No matter what it was, but—I don't want to be friends with him any more."

Hugh's heart lifted, but all he said was, "I'm glad, Vicky."

CHAPTER XXXI

HUGH TAKES THE STUMP

THEY found Scot still defying the predictions of the doctors by hanging on to the thread of life that tied him to this world. He was asleep when the travellers arrived. Within a few minutes Hugh was in the saddle again and on the way to meet Byers and his prisoner. Before morning they had Dutch behind bars in the Carson jail.

When Hugh tiptoed in to see Scot a second time, the wounded man smiled at him reproachfully. The Colonel's hand slid weakly along the bedspread to meet his brother's brown palm.

"Glad you're back safe," he said in a low voice.

"We brought Dutch along," Hugh said by way of explaining his absence.

A faint flash of amusement lit the drawn face. "Buck much, did he?"

"Oh, he reckoned he wouldn't come along. Then he reckoned he would."

Scot asked a question: "What have you been parboiling your face for?"

"Got caught in a mine fire. How are you feelin', Scot?"

"Fine and dandy," murmured the older brother indomitably. "Mollie's spoiling me. Everybody's mighty good. When I don't feel so trifling I'll say thank you proper."

Mollie kissed him and said gently, "Now, you've talked enough."

Business, much neglected of late, called Hugh to Virginia City. Every two or three days he ran down to Carson for a few hours. The doctors became more hopeful. The great vitality of their patient was beginning to triumph over the shock his system had endured.

Meanwhile, Scot's political campaign had died down. If the Dodsons had been willing to let it alone, Ralph would probably have been nominated without opposition. But this was just what they could not do. They knew themselves that they had played a poor part in the contest with the McClintocks, and they were afraid that Nevada's private judgment would be the same.

Sinister whispers passed from mouth to mouth. They found a discreet echo in the newspapers friendly to the Dodson candidacy. Scot McClintock had broken up the home of Robert Dodson. He belonged to Nevada's past and not her present. The disgraceful affair at Carson showed him to be a desperate man, in the same class as the men Hopkins and Dutch. This was hinted in veiled language and not openly charged by the press.

It was at the Maison Borget, as good a French restaurant as could be found between New York and San Francisco, that Hugh first learned of these rumours. He had been too busy to read any newspaper except a local one.

Senator Stewart, seated alone at a small side table, called to him. The young man took the place opposite him.

"How's the Colonel?" asked the senator.

"He's not out of danger, but we think he's gaining."

"Fine. Glad to hear it. What about his campaign?"

"It seems to have dropped by the wayside, Senator."

The big man stroked his long yellow beard. "Pity. I'd like to see him win. With these stories going around——"

"What stories?"

The senator told him. He ended with a startling question.

"Why don't you take the stump and answer the lies, Hugh?"

"Me. I'm no orator."

"None needed. You can talk straight, can't you? Call a lie a lie?"

"I reckon. But it's a game I don't savvy, Senator. If I was going gunnin' for statesmen I'd never snap a cap at Hugh McClintock."

"Just hit out hard from the shoulder. Talk

right out for Scot as though you were with two or three friends. Carry the war into the enemy's camp. Show how they've stacked the cards against your brother."

McClintock's eyes blazed. "I'll do it, Senator. I'll give Scot a run for his white alley yet."

He did. To every camp and town in the state he fared forth and told the story. He told it at mine shafts, in saloons, around hotel stoves, and in public meetings called for that purpose. Much to his surprise he developed a capacity for public speaking. His strength lay in the direct, forceful simplicity of what he said. He was so manifestly a sincere and honest champion that men accepted at face value what he said.

At one town Captain Palmer, who had organized the Aurora vigilance committee, introduced him in characteristic fashion.

"You see the big head on his broad shoulders. It's up to you to decide whether there's anything in it," he said bluntly.

Hugh plunged straight at his subject.

"I'm here to speak for a man who lies at Carson wounded by three bullets from the revolvers of two murderers. I'm here to answer the whispers set going by the men who profit most by that attempted assassination, men who would never have the courage to say any of these things face to face with Colonel McClintock."

He reviewed his brother's life and tried to interpret it.

"They say he was a gambler. So he was, at a time when nine tenths of the men in this state gambled hard and often. But they can't say he wasn't a straight gambler. There never was a crooked hair in the head of Scot McClintock. Everybody knows that."

Without gloves he took up the charge that Scot had broken up Robert Dodson's home. He showed that Dodson was a drunken ne'er-do-well who had smothered his own baby and had afterwards been rescued from a mob of lynchers by McClintock, that he was a wife beater and a loafer who by chance had later stumbled into a fortune, a man always without honour or principle.

"It was this same man who rode out of Carson at breakneck speed fifteen minutes after my brother had been shot down from behind, rode with the red-handed murderer Sam Dutch. It was this same man and his brother Ralph Dodson who tried to keep me and my friends from bringing Dutch back to Carson as a prisoner.

"From the beginning of this campaign they have smeared mud on the reputation of Scot. Even now, when he lies at the point of death at the hands of their hired killers, they go about hissing poisonous lies. The record of Scot McClintock is an open book. You know all his faults. They are exposed

frankly to all men's eyes. If he was wild, at least his wildness was never secret. It was a part of his gay and open-hearted youth."

Hugh passed to his later years, to his brilliant career as a soldier, and to his public services as a citizen since the close of the war. He named Scot's qualifications for the office he sought and concluded with an appeal for justice in the form of a vindication.

Nevada was young. It understood men like the McClintocks and it liked them. Ralph Dodson was of a type it neither knew nor wanted to know. The verdict was unmistakable. The political bosses gave way to the public demand, and Scot McClintock was nominated on the first ballot by a large majority.

Hugh took the Carson stage to carry his brother the news.

CHAPTER XXXII

FATHER MARSTON PROPHESIES

SULKY, morose, sluggish as a saurian, Dutch lay in his cell and waited for deliverance. The weeks passed. The Dodsons sent him word to say nothing, that when the time came they would set him free.

He suspected them as he suspected everybody. If they failed him he meant to betray them. But the time had not come for that yet.

As he grew weary of confinement his restlessness found vent in a plan of escape. From his boot he worked the tin piece used as a stiffener for the leg. With this as a tool and a piece of a broken bed slat as material he began to shape a wooden pistol. He worked only when he knew he would be alone. The shavings that came in thin slivers from the pine he hid in the mattress upon which he slept. When the weapon was finished he rubbed it with lamp black till it took in a measure the colour of steel.

It was in the man's temperament to be patient as an Apache when he found it to his advantage. He waited for his chance and found it when the jailer

made his round one evening to see that all was secure.

The moonlight was shining through the barred window on the bed in checkered squares of light. Dutch was pacing up and down his cell when the guard appeared. He moved forward to the door.

"Gimme a chew, Hank," he said ingratiatingly.

The killer was a sullen and vindictive prisoner. The jailer had tried to placate him, for now that Scot McClintock was getting better it would be only a question of time till Dutch would again be loose on the world.

"Sure, Sam."

The jailer dived into his right hip pocket, found a plug of tobacco, and handed it through the grating to his prisoner.

Dutch caught the man's wrist and twisted it down against the iron bar of the lattice. Simultaneously a pistol barrel gleamed through the opening.

"Gimme yore six-shooter. . . . Now unlock the door. Let out a squawk an' I'll pump lead into you."

The jailer obeyed orders. Dutch hustled him into the cell, then tied and gagged him. He took the keys, went downstairs, unlocked the outer door, and walked into the night a free man.

He stood for a moment at the door, hesitating. Which way should he go? The first thing was to

get a horse at some stable. That would be easy enough. All he had to do was to go in and ask for it. But should he go back to Piodie, try Virginia City, or cut across the Sierras to California and say good-bye to Nevada?

Before he had made up his mind which road to take his thoughts were deflected into another channel. A young woman passed on the other side of the street. He recognized her immediately. The light, resilient step, the gallant poise of the slender body identified their owner as Victoria Lowell. He was sure of it even before the moonlight fell full upon her profile.

His eyes lit with a cunning tigerish malice. Softly he padded down the street after her. There was in his mind no clear idea of what he meant to do. But he was a born bully. She was alone. He could torment her to his heart's content.

He moved faster, came abreast of her after she had turned into a dark side street. His step kept pace with hers. She looked up to see who her companion was.

A gasp of surprise broke from her throat.

His grin was a leer, hideous and menacing. "How are you, m'dear? Didn't expect to meet up with old Sam, did you? But tickled—plumb tickled to death to see him."

Involuntarily she quickened her step. His arm shot out and his great hand closed on her wrist. A

shriek welled up inside her, but she smothered it unvoiced. The shudder that ran through her body she could not control.

He purred on: "Came to meet old Sam soon as he got out. Had to see him right away, didn't you? Couldn't wait a minute."

With a twist of her forearm she tried to break away. His rough fingers crushed deeper into her soft flesh.

"You in a hurry, sweetheart?" he went on, and his heavy body shook with unholy mirth. "Afraid of old Sam's winnin' ways? Don't like to trust yore feelin's with them, I reckon."

"Let me go," she ordered, and her voice shook.

Instantly his mood changed. He thrust his hairy gorilla-like head close to hers. "When I get good an' ready, missie. Think you can boss Sam Dutch, do you? Think I've forgot how you shot me onct when I took you in outa the storm? Think I care for yore cry-baby ways? You'll do jest like I say."

"I'm going home. Don't you dare stop me." She could not make her quavering voice quite as confident as she would have liked.

"Home. So you're going home?" His slow thoughts struck another tangent. "Good enough. I'll trail along an' see you get there safe, missie. Like to say 'How-d'ye-do' to Colonel McClintock whilst I'm there." His teeth uncovered in a snarl of rage.

Vicky's fears for herself fled, swallowed up in the horror of a picture struck to life by her imagination. She saw Scot lying helpless on his bed with this ruffian gloating over him. A flash of memory carried her back to another scene. This time it was Hugh who lay at the ruffian's mercy—Hugh spent and all but senseless, his muscles paralyzed by the cold of the blizzard that raged outside.

A week before this Scot had been moved from the hotel to a small private house put at the family's disposal by friends who were temporarily in California. He and Mollie would be alone. She dared not lead the killer to the house. What ought she to do?

The killer now knew what was the first thing he meant to do. He would go and finish the job he had left undone some weeks earlier.

"Home it is, m'dear. Hot foot it. I got no time to waste. Where do you live?"

Her thoughts flew. Since he did not know where the house was she could mark time at least. They were close to a corner. She turned to the right.

"This way," she said, and led him away from the house where Scot was lying in bed.

He shuffled beside her, still holding fast to her wrist. His presence was repugnant to her. The touch of his flesh made hers creep.

"You're hurting me. Why don't you let me go? I'll not run away," she promised.

"I know you'll not—if you don't git a chance, sweetie." His fangs showed again in an evil grin. "If I hurt you some it ain't a circumstance to the way you hurt me onct. I ain't aimin' to let you play me no tricks like you done then."

They came to a house, set a little back from the road in a young orchard. Victoria opened the gate and they walked in. Her brain had registered an inspiration. Straight to the porch she went.

Dutch warned her. "Remember. No tricks, missie. You lead right into the room where he is an' don't say a word. Un'erstand?"

"Yes. You'll promise not to hurt him?"

"My business. I got an account to settle with both them McClintocks."

"At any rate, you won't hurt anybody else in the house," she said faintly. "You've got to promise that."

"Suits me. I ain't intendin' to run wild."

"Swear it," she insisted.

He swore it.

Vicky, still with his hateful fingers about her wrist, opened the door and walked into the house. At her touch a second door swung. Before Dutch could recover from the surprise of what he saw, he had moved forward with the girl into a room.

A man was sitting at a desk writing. He looked up, astonished at this interruption. The man was Father Marston.

"He wants me to take him to Scot," Vicky said simply.

Her explanation sufficed. Dutch, a many times killer, stood before him with a drawn revolver in his hand.

The minister rose. "So you brought him here instead. Well done, Vicky."

The desperado ripped out a violent oath. "Make a fool of Sam Dutch, will you?"

His fingers moved up to the fleshy part of the girl's forearm and tightened. She could not keep back a cry of pain.

Marston stepped forward. He had served through the war as a chaplain and the spirit of a soldier was in him.

"Hands off, Dutch!"

The teeth of the bad man ground together audibly. "You sittin' in, Parson?" he asked in a thick, furious voice.

"Yes. Take your hands off her."

The gaunt gray-eyed preacher faced the killer's rage and overmatched it. He had both moral courage and the physical to back it.

"Where's Scot McClintock?" demanded Dutch.

"We'll take that up when you've turned Miss Lowell loose."

"By God, you're not runnin' this."

"Get your hand away."

The bully felt that he either had to kill this man

or do as he said. He dare not shoot him down. Father Marston was too well beloved in Nevada. His was one of those staunch souls which commanded an immense respect. Back of him now the gunman felt the whole weight of civilized opinion in the state. It was a spiritual power too potent to be ignored.

The fingers loosened from Vicky's arm and fell away.

"Where's McClintock at?" the man with the revolver asked again hoarsely.

"First tell me this. What are you doing here? Why aren't you in prison where you belong?"

"Because I broke out. Tha's why."

"Then I'll give you a piece of advice. Get out of town. Now. Quick as you can hit the road."

"I'm askin' you where McClintock's at, Parson."

Again the eyes of the two battled.

"Sam Dutch, your name stands in this country for murder, treachery, drunkenness, and all other evils known to man. You're as black hearted a villain as ever I knew. If you've got one redeeming trait I don't know what it is. Now, listen. You're going to get out of town now. Right away. You're not going to murder Scot McClintock. You'll walk with me straight to Doc Benton's stable. You'll arrange with him for a horse. And you'll drop into the saddle and light a shuck out of Carson." The voice of the preacher rang harsh. It carried

conviction, but Dutch wanted to know what was back of this edict.

"Who says I'll do all that?" he sneered.

"I say it. If you don't I'll rouse the town and hang you in front of the jail. That's a promise made before God, Dutch. I'll keep it, so help me."

The killer's mind dodged in and out cunningly and could find no way of escape. He dared not kill Marston. He dared not let him go out and rouse the town against him. Though he was armed and Marston was without a weapon, it was he who was defenceless and the preacher who held him covered.

The bad man threw up his hands. "All right. You got me, Parson. I'll light a shuck, but God help you if I ever get you right. I'll sure fix you so you'll never do me another meanness."

The preacher stood before him straight as a sycamore.

"My life is in God's hand, Sam Dutch. You strut across the stage of life, poor braggart, and think yourself mighty powerful. You're no more than a straw in the wind. His eye is on you, man. You can't lift a finger without His permission. And in His scripture He has said a word about you. 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.' And again, 'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' That's His plain promise, Dutch. I tell you that your hour is close.

It's at hand. Repent and flee from the wrath to come."

Marston had the orator's gift of impressive speech. As he faced the killer, hand lifted in a gesture of prophecy, eyes flashing the fire of his conviction, Vicky felt a shiver run over her. The preacher was, so she felt for the moment, a messenger of destiny pronouncing doom upon a lost soul. In the light of what so swiftly followed she was to recall many times his burning and passionate prediction.

Dutch sneered, to cover the chill that passed through him. "The bullet ain't moulded yet that can kill Sam Dutch," he bragged.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE BOOMING OF THE FORTY-FIVES

AT THE gate Father Marston stopped. "You run along home, Vicky," he said. "I'll drop in after a while and see how the Colonel is."

The girl hesitated. "Hadn't I better go with you?" she said. It was not necessary for her to say in words that she was afraid to leave the chaplain alone with Dutch. All three of them understood it.

Marston laughed, rather grimly. "No, child. Mr. Dutch and I understand each other first rate. We'll get along fine. See you later."

She left them, reluctantly. The men took a side street that led toward Benton's stable. Dutch was anxious to be gone from Carson. The preacher's words had filled him with foreboding. He would not feel easy until the dust of the capital had long been shaken from his horse's hoofs.

His surly voice took on a whine. It was his way of attempting to propitiate fate. "I got a bad name, Parson, an' so folks don't feel right to me. Lemme

say that there's a heap of worse men than Sam Dutch. I've shot men sure enough, but I ain't ever shot one that wasn't better dead. Most folks don' know that. They think I go round killin' to see 'em kick. Well, I don't. Live an' let live would be my motto, if gunmen would only lemme alone. But you know yorese'f how it is, Parson. They git to thinkin' if they can bump off Sam Dutch they'll be chief. So they come lookin' for trouble, an' I got to accommodate 'em."

A man came down the street walking as though he loved it. His stride rang out sharp in the still night. He was singing softly the words of a trail song:

"Last night as I lay on the prairie,
And looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Would drift to that sweet by and by.
Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, little dogies, roll——"

Marston's heart lost a beat. He felt rather than saw the figure of the man at his side grow tense as it crouched. Steel flashed in the moonlight. The preacher struck at a hair-matted wrist as the gun roared.

The singer stopped in his tracks. With incredible quickness he dragged out a revolver and fired. The chaplain thrust Dutch from him and stepped back into the road out of the direct line of fire.

The boom of the forty-fives seemed continuous while the short sharp flashes stabbed the darkness.

A man groaned and clutched at his breast. He sank down, still firing. On his knees, supporting the weight of his body with the palm of his hand thrust against the ground, Dutch emptied his revolver, ferocious as a wounded grizzly. From his throat there issued a sound that was half a sob and half a snarl of rage.

The thunder of the guns died. The singer moved forward, warily, his gaze fastened on the huge huddled figure slowly sinking lower. One glance had been enough to tell him that Marston was not an enemy. Therefore he concentrated his attention on the centre of danger.

Marston ran to the fallen man and knelt down beside him. He tore open the coat and vest. A single look was sufficient. Three bullets had torn into the great barrel-like trunk of his body. One had pierced the right lung. A second had struck just below the heart. The third had raked from right to left through the stomach.

"Take my boots off," gasped the desperado.

The chaplain knew that Dutch was aware he had been mortally wounded. This request showed it. The Western gunman wanted always to be without his boots on when he died.

Father Marston eased his head while Hugh McClintock removed the boots.

A gargoyle grin was on the face of the bad man. He meant to "die game," after the manner of his kind.

"You sure rang a bull's eye, Parson, when you pulled them Bible texts on me. At that, maybe I'd 'a' fooled you if you hadn't spoiled my aim that first shot."

"You realize——"

"—that I got more'n I can carry? Sure do."

Marston forgot that this man was the worst desperado Nevada had ever known. He remembered only that the soul of Sam Dutch, a poor erring human being, was about to meet its Maker.

"His mercy endureth for ever. Repent. Repent and be saved," he exhorted earnestly.

"Too late, Parson," Dutch answered feebly. "I'm a—dyed-in-the-wool sinner—an' I'm—hittin' the trail—for hell."

"It's never too late. 'While the light holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return.' That's you, Sam."

"That's sure me, but—I don't reckon—I'll——"

His body stiffened suddenly, then relaxed limply. He was dead.

The two men rose and looked at each other. Hugh spoke first.

"I had to do it, Father. It was Dutch or me."

"Yes, you had to do it."

"He didn't give me any choice. Came a-shootin' before I knew even who he was."

"I saw what he was doing just in time to hit his arm."

"I reckon that saved me. You were that quick. I can't thank you."

"Don't thank me, Hugh. Thank God." He looked soberly down at the dead man. "There, but for His grace, lies Hugh McClintock."

"Yes," agreed Hugh solemnly.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE BALD KNOB STRIKE

THE room with the bullet hole in the swing door at the Ormsby House had become a place of pilgrimage. The proprietor of the hotel and its patrons pointed it out with pride to strangers and told the story of how Scot McClintock, left for dead, had come to life by sheer will power and killed one of the murderers through the door without even seeing him.

In Scot's actions there had always been a quality which distinguished them from those of other men. He had the gift of the heroic touch—somehow struck from men's imaginations a spark of fire. His gaiety and spirit, the sunny grace of his bearing, made for romance.

The affair at the Ormsby House capped the climax. It bordered on the Homeric. To be taken at advantage by the two most redoubtable killers of the West, to be shot through and through and left for dead, and to take immediate vengeance on one of them under almost impossible circumstances was

a combination of dramatic effect so unusual as to pinnacle even Colonel McClintock.

But it had remained for Hugh to write the last act of the drama. He found men looking at him with a new respect. Even old friends showed a slight deference. It was not only that he had killed in a duel the terrible Dutch, though this in itself was a sufficient exploit. The manner in which justice had at last found the killer satisfied men's sense of fitness. The story was told everywhere, and with a touch of awe, that Father Marston had prophesied to Dutch the swift avengement of God. On the heel of that prediction the lightnings had flamed from Hugh McClintock's revolver.

That Hugh had been the instrument of justice was felt to be especially meet. He had dragged back to Carson, from the pit of hell where he had been buried, the attempted murderer of his brother. He had struck with such deadly accuracy that any one of the three bullets flung by him would have been fatal.

Without intention on his part, Hugh's subsequent conduct increased the respect in which he was held. He refused to be lionized, declined even to tell the story of the killing except to the coroner's jury. Inevitably there began to rise a legend of the prowess of the McClintocks which cast a spell over romantic minds.

The immediate result was that Scot was elected

secretary of state by the largest majority in the history of Nevada. When he was sworn into office the management of the firm's business devolved wholly upon Hugh. The Virginia & Truckee railroad was partly completed. Within a few years fifty or sixty trains a day would be twisting to and fro over the most tortuous bit of track in the United States. The McClintocks saw the handwriting on the wall and began to reduce the number of their teams, ore wagons, and freight outfits.

From Piodie came a telegram to Hugh. It was signed by Jim Budd, newly elected sheriff of that county:

The Ground Hog is on a rampage. Big strike. Come at once.

Hugh found Piodie buzzing with excitement. The strike on Bald Knob aroused keen interest because this was a new field. There had been a good deal of development work done there, but the Ground Hog strike was the first worth-while one that had been made. Prospectors stampeded for the scene and located every unoccupied inch for miles. The wiser heads besieged the owners of claims on the Knob for leases.

Byers drove Hugh out to Bald Knob, and the two looked over the Ground Hog together. If the assays that had been made held good in general, they estimated that from ten to fifteen thousand dollars'

worth of ore had been raised within the week from the shaft. Afterwards Hugh visited the claims held by himself, Scot, and Vicky, to make sure that the assessment work had been properly done. He knew that if there was any excuse for it whatever somebody would jump these claims. He decided that the best thing to do would be to get leasers on the properties as soon as possible, for if possession is not nine points of the law it is at least one or two points.

"I want to tell you that yore claims would have been jumped before this," Sheriff Budd told Hugh later with a wise nod of his head, "if it hadn't been that you McClintocks are such darned go-getters nobody wanted to take a chance."

"How about Miss Lowell's claim?" asked Hugh.

"Well, she's done a heap of work on it. I don't reckon any one could hardly get away with it, her bein' so popular here, too, an' a lone, defenceless girl at that. Piodie would be liable to rare up on its hind laigs an' say, 'Hands off!' But it's different with you an' Scot. Someone with guts is apt to jump them claims any minute."

Hugh dropped around to the schoolhouse that afternoon to walk home with the lone girl who was popular. He found her administering corporal punishment vigorously to a red-headed youth who promised with sobs never to do it again. She was not at that moment at all popular with red-head

Hugh judged, and she did not look exactly defenceless.

At sight of her visitor Miss Lowell went red as a flame. She did not often use the switch, and when she did she regarded it as a confession of failure to handle the case wisely. It was embarrassing to be caught in the rôle of a stormy Amazon. It seemed to her that Hugh was always getting glimpses into the unlovely and vixenish side of her character. Yet she knew she had whipped the boy only after forcing herself to do it.

"I've told Tommie time and again he mustn't bully the little boys. I've talked it all over with him and argued with him. But he's a perverse little imp. To-day he had three small chaps crying. He practically defied me. When I threatened to whip him he said he'd like to see me try it. After that I had to do it." Vicky sighed, close to tears herself. "He's the only child in school I haven't got along with. Most of them like me."

"Of course they do, and so does Tommie," Hugh told her confidently. "It's just his way of making you pay attention to him. Probably he's in love with you."

"Well, he won't be any more," the young teacher said, laughing regretfully.

"Oh, yes, he will. He'll like you all the better. He'll be glad he's found his boss. I know Tommie's

kind. You've taken just the right course with him. Some boys have to be appealed to once vigorously through the cuticle. Now you'll have no more trouble with him."

"I hope you're right." Vicky changed the subject. They were walking home together along a path that led to the main street of the town. "Isn't it splendiferous news about the Ground Hog? I'm *so* glad you've made a strike."

"I wanted to speak with you about that. There's some danger of our claims being jumped—not the Ground Hog, but those on which we have been doing only assessment work. Byers and I looked over yours. I don't see how yours can be in any danger. You've done too much developing. But you can never be sure."

"I've paid out nearly three hundred dollars for wages," she said quickly.

"Yes, I know. Did you take receipts?"

"No, I didn't. Ought I?"

"Better get 'em. What are your plans?"

"A dozen people have been around to ask me for leases. I hardly know what to do. What do you think?"

"The more men you get working there the better. You can't afford to pay wages, so you'd better sign a lease. I wouldn't give it to a single person, but to two or three in partnership. Tie 'em up tight.

Have a good lawyer make the papers out, so that there isn't anything left in doubt. Be sure you get the proper terms."

"And good leasers," she suggested.

"Yes, that's important."

"Will you go with me when we're arranging the lease?" she asked, a little shyly.

"Glad to, of course."

They talked of Scot and his recovery to health, of Mollie's joy in her baby, and of young Alexander Hugh himself, who was developing wonderful intelligence, if the letters of his mother were worthy of credence.

In front of the Mammoth Saloon they met Ralph Dodson. He bowed, and Hugh answered his bow stiffly. Since the attempt on his brother's life and the subsequent political campaign, McClintock did not pretend to anything but contempt for those of the name of Dodson. He acknowledged the salute only because he was with Vicky.

The girl flushed angrily. "We're not friends any more, but he keeps that smile of his working just the same," she told Hugh. "I told him what I thought of the way they fight. He pretended to be amused, but he was furious when I asked him not to speak to me when we met. He's really more dangerous than his brother."

"Yes, because he's far abler."

Mrs. Budd met them at the front door and hustled

Hugh quickly into the house. "I've just had a message from Jim. There's a warrant out for your arrest. It's for killin' Sam Dutch, I expect. Who ever heard the like? But Jim's got to serve it, he says. So I'm to hide you in the attic. When he comes he'll look for you and won't find you."

"What's the use? If they've got a warrant out for me they'll get me sooner or later. The verdict of the coroner's jury was that Dutch came to his death at the hands of God. It's some trick. They can't make it stick."

"That's what Jim says. It's a trick. Irish Tom told him there is something in the air. He doesn't know just what. But the Dodsons are back of it. So Jim says for you to lie low and see what happens."

"All right, Mrs. Budd. We'll let Jim run this," Hugh said. "I'm in the hands of my friends, like the willin' candidates for office say they are."

"Supper'll be ready in a little. I'll have Bennie watch the road so as to give you time to get upstairs if any one comes. I expect you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry when Mrs. Budd gives me an invitation to eat," he answered, smiling. "She's the best cook in Nevada, and a two-bit restaurant doesn't draw me a-tall on those glad occasions."

It was on the tip of Mrs. Budd's sharp tongue to say that the company at her table might have something to do with that, but since she was manœuvring

to bring about a certain match between two young people present she refrained from comment.

Hugh did very well on steak, roast wild duck, potatoes, home-made bread, honey, and dried-apple pie. It is probable that he did not enjoy himself less because a young woman sat opposite him whose dark eyes flashed soft lights of happiness at him and whose voice played like sweet music on his heart.

Mrs. Budd was urging on him another piece of pie when Bennie ran in with news.

"Dad's comin' down the road with two other men," he shouted in a lifted key of youthful excitement.

Hugh retired to the garret.

Sheriff Budd came wheezing into the house followed by his deputies. "Seen anything of Hugh McClintock?" he asked his wife.

"Where would I see him? I haven't been out of the house," his plump helpmate answered tartly.

"Well, I got to search the house. Some folks seem to think he's here."

"What's he done?" asked Vicky.

"Why, he kidnapped that good kind citizen Sam Dutch, a man who hadn't murdered but fourteen or fifteen people, and who never packed more'n two guns an' a pig-sticker at one time," the sheriff said dryly. "Such lawlessness sure ought to be punished severe. I'd say send this McClintock fellow to

Congress or somethin' like that. Make a sure-enough example of him."

Jim waddled into the dining room. His eye fell on the devastation of the supper table. If he noticed the extra plate at the table he made no comment upon it. Neither did the deputies. The sheriff had hand-picked them carefully. Little Bennie followed, wriggling with excitement. Up to date this was the big adventure of his young life.

Jim's eyes asked a question of his wife and received an answer. He learned from the wireless that had passed between them that his instructions had been carried out.

"Look through the kitchen and the hen house, boys," the sheriff gave orders. "Then we'll move upstairs. I don't reckon he could be here without Mrs. Budd knowin' it. But the way to make sure is to look."

They presently trooped upstairs. While the deputies were searching the bedrooms Budd puffed up to the garret. In order to establish his identity he sang a solo:

> "Old dog Tray ever faithful
> Grief cannot drive him away.
> He's gentle and he's kind,
> And you'll never, never——"

The sheriff opened the door of the attic and stepped in. Hugh was straddling a chair with his

elbows across the back of it. He grinned at his friend.

"I'd talk about being faithful if I was you, Jim," he murmured lazily. "Here you've deserted that good old friend Grimes whose coat was so unusual it buttoned down before and——"

Budd shut the door hurriedly. "No use tellin' the boys you're here. What they don't know won't hurt them none."

"True enough. What's up, Jim? Why all this hide-and-go-seek business?"

"I dunno what's up, but somethin's gonna be pulled off. The Dodsons want you locked up in the calaboose while the fireworks are on. If they want you in, we want you out. That's how I figure it."

"Why not oblige 'em and put me in jail? Then they'll be easy in their minds an' start in on their programme. You can fix it so I escape when I'm needed."

But Budd had opinions of his own on that point. "No, sir, I don't aim to let any prisoners break outa my jail if I can help it. While I'm sheriff I'll be a sure enough one. Onct you git behind the bars you're my prisoner an' I'm an officer sworn to keep you there. But now I'm old Jim Budd an' you're Kid McClintock."

This seemed to Hugh a distinction without a difference, but he understood that to Budd it made the line of cleavage between what was the square

thing and what was not. He did not attempt to argue with him.

"All right. Have it yore own way, old-timer."

The sheriff went downstairs and reported to his men that they would go down and search the corral stable for the man they wanted.

"Some of us ce'tainly would have seen him if he'd been in this house," he concluded.

One of the deputies, who was rolling a cigarette, grinned down at the makings. It chanced that he had heard voices in the attic.

"Some of us sure would," he agreed affably. "Me, I ain't lost McClintock awful bad anyhow."

CHAPTER XXXV

McCLINTOCK READS TENNYSON

MISS LOWELL, schoolmarm, sat in the parlour of her boarding house and corrected spelling papers. Across the lamplit table from her was Hugh McClintock. He was browsing through a volume of poems written by the man who had been for two decades and still was the world's most popular philosopher of progress. The book was Vicky's, and she handed it to him with a word of youth's extravagant praise.

"I think he's the greatest poet that ever lived."

Hugh smiled. "He'll have to step some." He mentioned Shakespeare and others.

But Vicky flamed with the enthusiasm of a convert. "It's not only the music of his words. It's what he says. He shakes the dead bones so. If you haven't read 'In Memoriam' you must."

"I've read it."

"Did you ever read anything so—so inspiring?"

"It's great. Remember that Flower-in-the-crannied-wall piece. I don't recollect how it goes exactly, but he pulls it out by the roots an' talks at it.

Says if we knew what it was and how it had come we'd know what God and man are. I reckon that's right. He sure set me thinking."

"I love him." The girl's face was aglow in the lamplight. "He's just wonderful, that's all."

It is difficult now to understand the tremendous influence of Tennyson among all the English-speaking peoples fifty years ago. Before Darwin was accepted and even before he had published, the Victorian poet was pointing the way with prophetic vision. He was the apostle of the new age, of the intellectual freedom that was to transform the world. His voice penetrated to the farthest corners of Australia and America. The eager and noble minds of youth turned everywhere to him for guidance.

To-night, however, Hugh was nibbling at verse less profound. He was reading "The Gardener's Daughter." A descriptive phrase flashed at him:

> A certain miracle of symmetry,
> A miniature of loveliness, all grace
> Summed up and closed in little.

Involuntarily his glance swept to the dusky head on the other side of the table. Her shining-eyed ardour seemed to him the flowering of all young delight. Another verse leaped out at him from the page:

> . . . those eyes
> Darker than darkest pansies, and that hair
> More black than ashbuds in the front of March.

He turned the pages abruptly and began "The Charge of the Light Brigade." It would never do for him to get sentimental.

Mrs. Budd opened the door and pushed her head into the room. "Mr. Ralph Dodson's here an' would like to see you—on business," she announced.

"To see me?" asked Hugh.

"No. Miss Lowell."

"I wonder what about," murmured that young woman, putting down the paper she was marking.

"He didn't say."

"Well, I don't care to see him."

"Hadn't you better?" suggested Hugh. "If he's got something up his sleeve we might as well know what it is."

"All right. He can come in."

Hugh rose to go, but she made a little gesture that asked him to stay. "If you don't mind," she said, smiling at him.

"Not a bit. He probably knows I'm here, anyhow."

Dodson bowed to Vicky, more stiffly to McClintock. The man from Virginia City just acknowledged his greeting.

"If you've come to see me about my claim, Mr. Dodson, you can speak before Mr. McClintock. He's my business adviser," Vicky said.

The big mine owner was ever so slightly taken aback. "My business is rather private," he said.

"Do you mean that it is a secret?"

"Oh, no. I have an offer to make you. But first I ought to preface it with a statement of fact," he said formally. "Your title to the claim you've been working isn't good, I'm afraid."

"Why isn't it?" she asked sharply.

"A prior interest in it was held by Singlefoot Bill, an old prospector who located on Bald Knob and worked all over it."

"He did no work on my claim to speak of. When I began my assessment work there wasn't a hole two feet deep on the location."

He smiled. "That will be a matter for the courts to determine, I suppose."

"The courts. What do you mean?" she snapped. "This old prospector never did any real digging on my claim. He's dead, anyhow. Who is there to make trouble?"

"Nobody will make you trouble, I'm sure, Miss Lowell," said Dodson with a suave smile. "My brother and I will be pleased to sign over the claim to you."

"Sign it over to me? What have *you* got to do with it?"

"We own it. We own practically all the Bald Knob group of mines."

Hugh spoke for the first time. "News to me, Mr. Dodson. When did you get 'em?"

"Almost two years ago. We bought out Singlefoot Bill."

"Who didn't own 'em."

"We think he did. The courts will probably have to pass on the title."

"He never patented them. How could he, when he had done no work to speak of on them?"

"We'll prove he did, Mr. McClintock," purred Dodson. "He seems to have done all that was required."

"How can you claim that? He hardly stuck a pick in any of the claims that are being worked by us or our friends."

"I think we'll be able to furnish evidence to show that he did," Dodson answered smoothly.

"I don't doubt that," retorted McClintock. "You could get witnesses to swear that you are Napoleon Bonaparte. But it's too raw. You can't put it over."

Dodson smiled a thin-lipped smile. "No need to discuss that now. Fortunately Nevada has courts above reproach."

"It's plain robbery," Victoria said indignantly.

"Attempted robbery," amended Hugh. "It won't succeed."

"I'm not here to bandy names. What I came to say is that my brother and I want to do justice, Miss Lowell. You've been spending money on the claim you thought was yours. We intend to relinquish it to you."

"I won't take it," the girl answered hotly, her

cheeks stained with high colour. "I'll stand or fall with my friends. You can't buy me off."

"If you look at it that way, of course there's nothing more to be said," replied Dodson with dignity. "I'm sorry. I'll say good-evening, Miss Lowell."

"Just a moment, sir." Hugh's voice was like the sound of steel on steel. "What's this about a warrant for my arrest?"

Dodson looked at him, eye to eye. "Well, what about it?"

"I killed Sam Dutch in self-defence. The coroner's jury was satisfied."

"Then so am I. I'm told this warrant charges conspiracy to kidnap and kidnapping."

Dodson turned contemptuously to the door. At the same instant it opened and Byers stepped into the room. His glance travelled from Dodson to McClintock.

"They've jumped our claims," he said quietly.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SIGNED BY WILLIAM THORNTON

WHEN Byers spoke Dodson looked hurriedly at his watch.

Hugh was the first to speak. "Who told you?"

"Jim Flynn. He hustled right down from Bald Knob."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No. Our boys threw up their hands. Jumpers had the drop on 'em."

"Flynn know any of the gunmen?"

"Sloan was one," answered Byers.

McClintock turned to Dodson. "Do you pay yore gun-fighters by the job or by the day?" he asked contemptuously.

"I don't answer questions put that way, McClintock," said Dodson stiffly. "Your manner is an insult, sir."

"It's an insult if these roughs are not being paid by you. Can you tell me that they're not?" demanded Hugh, eyes cold as the steel-gray waters of Lake Tahoe on a wintry morning.

"I'll tell you nothing under compulsion, sir."

"Which means that I'm right. You and yore brother are back of this outrage. You think you can get away with our property by wholesale bribery. I should think you'd know the men you're fightin' better than that."

"We ask for nothing that's not ours. We don't intend to let ourselves be bulldozed out of anything that is." The dark colour flashed into the cheeks of Dodson. His anger, envenomed by months of repression, boiled out of him as red-hot lava from a crater. "I'll show you McClintocks whether you run this state. If it takes every cent I've got in the world I'll ruin you both. To hear and see you a man would think you were in partnership with God Almighty. You've got folks buffaloed. But not me—not me!" He slammed his fist down hard on the table so that the lamp jumped.

He whirled and strode from the room in a fury.

"War, looks like," said Hugh, turning with a smile to his friends.

"I never knew him to lose his temper before," said Vicky. "You spoke pretty straight to him. Do you think that was wise?"

"Why not? He's been our enemy for a long time. Might as well bring him into the open."

"He knew the claims were going to be jumped, you think?"

"Yes, but his machine slipped a cog. D' you

see him look at his watch when Dan told us? He knew what was on the programme, but it took place earlier in the evenin' than he had arranged for. That's how I figure it out, anyhow."

"What are we going to do about it?" asked Vicky.

She knew that the history of the Nevada and California mining camps was full of tragedies due to disputes over mining locations. Claim jumping was not infrequent, and in a good many cases the jumpers finally won the day. Usually the stronger characters won, regardless of the justice of the case.

"We're going to get our claims back," Hugh replied.

Byers nodded. He was as decided on that point as his partner. The only question was in what way.

Sheriff Budd, greatly excited, waddled in; Mrs. Budd was hard on his heels.

"Hell's hinges, boys!" he broke out. "Have you all heard what them scalawags have done pulled off?"

"I been expectin' it," Mrs. Budd announced calmly. She was a woman impossible to surprise. She made a good wife and mother, but there were moments when Jim wished she wouldn't say "I told you so" quite as often as she did.

"Then I hope you're expectin' us to re-jump 'em, Mrs. Budd," Hugh said with a grin.

They discussed ways and means. If possible, they meant to get back their property without bloodshed.

"If this was Sloan's play all we'd have to do would

be to throw him out. But there's brains back of this move. We're dealin' with Ralph Dodson. If we gain possession we still have the courts to reckon with. So we've got to move carefully and see we don't blunder into any mistake," Hugh said.

"You're shoutin', Kid," the sheriff agreed. "It wouldn't he'p us a whole lot to go up to the Supreme Court with two-three killings on the record against our title."

They slept on their problem and discussed it again next day. Hugh sent to Virginia City for Scot and a good lawyer. There were more conferences. Out of them came one or two decisions. Scot, Hugh, and their lawyer called at the office of the Katie Brackett and asked to see Ralph Dodson. He was out, but his brother Robert was in. At first he refused to meet them, but his visitors were so insistent that they would not take no for an answer.

Dodson had them admitted to his office. Sloan sat beside him. Another gunman was in the room. From the yellow-gray eyes of the mine owner a furtive look slid round at the McClintocks and their lawyer.

"Now, looky here, Browning," he said irritably to the lawyer, "there's no manner o' use in you pesterin' me. See Ralph. He'll talk turkey with you. I got nothin' to do with this."

"All we want is to see the paper you and Singlefoot Bill signed up. We're entitled to see it. You've

jumped the Ground Hog and other claims owned by my group of clients. We'd like to look over your title. Of course we're all anxious to avoid trouble. The only way to do that is to let us know where you stand."

Dodson listened sourly. But he was not a fool. He knew Browning could get a court order to look at the paper. There was no real objection to it, and when one is playing an underhanded game it is better to give an impression of bluff frankness.

"You'll gimme yore word not to keep the paper nor to injure it—you or yore clients either?"

"Of course. This is business, not highway robbery."

Dodson shot a slant look of warning at Sloan and went to the safe. He returned with a sheet of foolscap paper upon which had been written an agreement by which William Thornton, known as Singlefoot Bill, relinquished all rights in certain designated patented mining claims on Bald Knob to Robert and Ralph Dodson in consideration of three thousand dollars now paid him in hand.

Browning copied the paper exactly, word for word, and comma for comma. Meanwhile, Sloan, his gun in his hand, watched him and the McClintocks every second of the time. Both brothers looked the contract over.

The lawyer pushed the paper back to Dodson. "Much obliged. Of course it's not worth the price

of the ink on it, but you probably won't be satisfied of that till the courts have said so."

"You can bet yore boots we make it good," retorted Dodson, his dodging eyes jumping to the men he hated so bitterly.

The three callers left the office. From the time they had entered it till the time they left, the McClintocks had not said a word except in asides to their lawyer.

"I don't know on how solid a foundation their case rests," Browning said as they walked along Turkey Creek Avenue. "But it never does to underestimate your opponents. First, we'll check up and try to learn if the claims ever were patented. Then we've got to find out all about that contract, the circumstances under which it was signed, whether there was any record of it made at Austin. We ought to be able to discover if old Singlefoot showed any evidence of having money immediately after it was signed. Think I'll go to Austin and make some investigations."

"Yes, let's get to the bottom of it," Scot agreed. "It looks fishy to me that they'd pay Singlefoot three thousand for claims not worth a cent then."

"Especially when he had no valid title and all they had to do was to relocate them," added Hugh.

"Not like the Dodson way of doing business," admitted Browning. "I don't know where the nigger in the woodpile is, but he's there somewhere."

"Think you'd better go to Austin with Mr. Browning, Scot," Hugh said. "You have so many friends there you might be able to find out something important."

Scot dropped a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Want to cut me out of the fun here, do you? Couldn't think of leaving yet. But I'll tell you what I will do. I'll join Browning at Austin soon as we've taken the next trick."

"Which is——?"

"To get possession of the Ground Hog and the other claims."

"You ought not to figure in that, Scot," the younger brother protested. "You're a public character now. You've got to look at the future. Politically——"

"I've got to live with myself a few years, Hugh. How would I feel if I ducked out and left you to handle this job? No, I'll go through. It's up to us to use some strategy so as to get our properties back without killing anybody. That's what our brains are for."

Hugh did not push his point. He knew when he was beaten.

"I've been millin' over an idea that might work out," he said.

"What is it?"

"I haven't got it quite worked out yet. In an hour or two maybe I'll unload it from my mind."

As soon as Browning had left them he sketched his plan to Scot.

Colonel McClintock's eyes began to shine. "Ought to work out fine, if the valley lies as you say. Let's go right to it to-night."

"To-night suits me," said Hugh. "But we'll have to hustle the arrangements."

They spent a busy day.

CHAPTER XXXVII

HUGH EXPLAINS

BACK of Piodie, on the other side of a high ridge, is a deep valley hemmed in by rock-rimmed walls. Its area is about ten or fifteen acres.

The McClintocks climbed the ridge and looked down into the park. It was filled with dead and down piñon. Two years before a fire had started there, had raged furiously for a day, and had died down before the persistent attack of a heavy snow-storm. Since that time a new growth of underbrush had come up.

Scot and Hugh circled the rim, studying carefully the contour of the slopes. The upper half of these were rock-ribbed. The timber had climbed up to these boulder outcroppings and had there given up the fight to reach the summit, driven back by the lack of soil in which to root. Down in the basin the dead trees had crashed and lay across each other in confusion.

"The fire never could have got out of the valley even if the snow hadn't stopped it," Scot said.

"That's how it looks to me," Hugh agreed. "The only thing that could make it dangerous would be a high wind."

"It would have to be a gale to spread the fire outside. The rocks made a break as safe as a fireplace."

They covered every inch of the rim to make sure of this. They did not want to take any chance of setting fire to the town. Before they left the valley they were satisfied that a fire inside it could not do any damage.

Budd and Byers, who knew the people of the town better than the McClintocks did, set about gathering allies for the night campaign. Piodie was full of lawless adventurers ready to take a hand in any enterprise directed against the Dodsons. The difficulty was not to get enough of them, but to select the ones with cool heads not likely to be carried away by excitement.

As Vicky was walking home from school she met Hugh.

"Tell me everything. What have you done? Did he let you see the contract? Have you plans made yet?" In her eagerness the words of her questions tumbled over each other.

Hugh told her all he thought it was good for her to know. He trusted implicitly her discretion, but it was possible there might be blood shed in the attempt to win back the claims, and he did not want to make her a party to it.

"I wish I could help," she sighed. "It's horrid sometimes to be a girl. If it wasn't for my school I could go to Austin, though, and look up the contract."

"Yes, you could do that fine. But the fact is I want to get Scot away from here. Robert Dodson hates him. I don't think he's safe on the streets. You know how it is with gunmen. Their trigger fingers itch to kill men with reputations for gameness. Ever since that affair at the Ormsby House, Scot has been a shining mark. If Dodson should egg them on——"

The girl looked at him with an odd smile. "I suppose *you're* safe enough here."

"Oh, yes. They won't bother me."

"No, I suppose not," she answered with a touch of sarcasm. "You're only the man that killed Sam Dutch, the one that dragged him away from his friends to jail. Nobody would want to interfere with anybody as inoffensive as you."

"I didn't drag him away, Vicky. You did that when you stopped the rescue at the mine and planned a way to get him out of town."

"Both you and Scot are too foolhardy," she scolded. "You go along with your heads up and a scornful 'Well-here-I-am, shoot-me-down-from-behind-if-you-want-to' air that there's no sense in. A man owes something to his friends and his relatives, doesn't he? No need of always wearing a chip on your shoulder, is there?"

"Does Scot carry a chip on his shoulder?" Hugh asked, smiling.

"Oh, well, you know what I mean. He could try to dodge trouble a little—and so could you. But you're both so stiff-necked."

"I reckon Scot figures that the safest way to duck danger is to walk right through it," he said gently. "There are times when you can't run away from it. I always run when I can. Different with Scot. *You* blow him up good. He needs to take better care of himself, what with Mollie an' the baby dependent on him."

"*Yes*, you run," she scoffed. "Were you running from it when you plastered this town with handbills about Sam Dutch's knife? I've heard all about it."

"A man's got to throw a bluff sometimes, or get off the earth and eat dirt."

"And the time you ran him out of Aurora."

"Hmp! If I'd weakened then he'd 'a' followed me an' made me Number Twelve or Thirteen in his private graveyard."

"You make excuses, but there's something in what Ralph Dodson says—that you act as though you had some kind of partnership with Providence that protected you."

"If you can point out a single time when either Scot or I went out lookin' for trouble, Vicky, I'll plead guilty to being too high-heeled. All we ask is to be let alone. When it's put up to him and forced

on him, a man can't crawl out of danger. He's got to go through."

She smiled. "You put me in the wrong, of course. I know you don't either of you want trouble. You've used the right word yourself. You McClintocks are high-heeled. You walk as though you were king of Prussia."

"I've got him backed off the map. I'm an American citizen," he answered, meeting her smile.

But though Vicky scolded him, she knew that she would not want Hugh to carry himself a whit less debonairly. Her spirit went out in kinship to meet his courage. She gloried in it that he would not let himself be daunted by the enmity of men less scrupulous and clean of action, that he went to meet unsmilingly whatever fate might have in store for him. Surely it was only in her beloved West that men like the McClintocks were bred.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BATTLE OF BALD KNOB

AFTER night had fallen men drifted inconspicuously to the Pony Express Corral. They were armed, all of them with revolvers, two or three with rifles. If any one had studied the faces of the group that gathered round the lantern held by Byers, he would have voted these men hard citizens. Their eyes were steady. They wasted no words and no gestures. Byers had picked them because, as he had put it, "they would stand the gaff."

Without any discussion of the subject Scot naturally took command of the expedition. He had learned the habit of it during the war.

"You know what we're going to do," he said quietly. "The Dodsons have jumped our claims and put up dummies to hold them. We'll not stand for it. We plan to get the claims back by strategy. Later I'll tell you how. I suppose Dan has explained to you where you come in. We'll give leases on Bald Knob to those who go through with us. Understand one thing. We're not looking for trouble. I don't want a single shot fired if we can help it. We're not going to kill anybody. It won't be neces-

sary. But you boys know Sloan's gang. They'll fight if they get a chance. It's up to us to see that they don't get that chance."

An old-timer who had come round the Horn spoke up: "Sounds good, Colonel. How do you aim to get these bully puss men of Dodson's to give up without snappin' a cap at us? You sure got me guessin'."

"That part of the programme comes a little later, Buck," Scot said, smiling at him. "I think we can pull it off, but I'm not sure. There's a risk for us. I don't deny that. They might get one of us. We've got to take a chance on that."

"Let's get this right, Colonel. Do you mean if they shoot at us we're not to give 'em what for back?"

"I mean that if there's only a wild shot or two we're not to fire back. This isn't a feud. We want possession of our property. The whole thing will have to be fought out in the courts later, so we don't want to go to law with a black record of any killings against us. Besides, we're peaceable citizens who want our rights. We're not gun-fighters."

"All right," grinned Buck. "You're runnin' this shebang. I never was in a drift just like this before, but I reckon it's all right. If I'm the one they get, Colonel, you'll have to be chief mourner at the plantin'."

"Don't worry, Buck. Our diamond drill's going to strike pay ore sure. It's the Dodson crowd that's

likely to be in borrasca. Now if you're all ready we'll be travelling."

Byers led the way up the gulch back of the corral. Before the party had gone far a young moon came out and lit the path. They picked their trail through the sage and greasewood to the head of the ravine and followed a draw which took into the cow-backed hills. The pony express rider wound round to the rear of Bald Knob and climbed a spur upon which grew a fairly thick grove of pine nut. Here he stopped.

"Better camp here, I reckon."

The men unrolled their blankets and prepared a fireless camp. Soon most of them were sound asleep. Scot and Byers moved up the shoulder of the hill to reconnoitre. They knew that guards would be watching to prevent a surprise, so they took precautions against being seen. By following a swale through the brush they were able to come close enough to see dimly the shaft house of the Ground Hog and the slaty dump which straggled below like a thin beard.

"Looks quiet enough," Scot whispered.

Byers nodded.

"Hugh won't begin to paint the sky till after midnight," the Colonel went on. "About that time we'll bring the men up here into the draw and have them ready. You're sure that little fellow Madden is all right? He won't betray us?"

"You can tie to him," Byers said.

"I don't doubt his good will. What about his judgment? He looks simple. That's all right, too, if he's not shrewd enough not to make a mistake."

"He won't."

"If they suspect a thing it's all up with the plan."

"Gotta take a chance."

"Yes."

They lay in the sage for hours, the multitudinous voices of the night all about them in whispers of the wind, rustlings of furtive desert dwellers, the stirring of foliage under the caress of the breeze.

McClintock read midnight on the face of his watch and murmured to his companion, "Time to get the men up."

Byers rose without a word and disappeared in the darkness.

Far away toward the north a faint pink began to paint the sky. The colour deepened till the whole sky above Piodie took on a rose-coloured tint.

The men from the camp below joined Scot. One whispered to another, "Look at the sky, Ben."

"Fire, looks like. Bet it's Piodie," the other said, startled.

"No, it's not Piodie. It's the valley back of the big hill north of town," McClintock told them.

"How do you know, Colonel?" asked the first speaker.

"Because that painted sky is a part of our fireworks," he answered. "I'll explain the programme, boys. Madden is to run across the shoulder of the hill toward the Ground Hog. When the guard stops him he'll shout, 'Fire in Piodie; whole town burning up.' He'll explain that Dodson wants them all to come back to fight fire. My guess is that they'll take one look at the sky and start north *muy pronto*. For most of the men guarding the mine own houses in Piodie. The news will spread down the hill, and all we'll have to do is to walk in and take possession. That is, if we're lucky."

"Wow! Some strategy, Colonel. Did they learn you that in the war?" asked the old-timer who had come round the Horn.

"Afraid I can't take credit for it. Another man made the plan of campaign. It's up to us to execute it. Ready, Madden?"

"Y'betcha, Colonel."

McClintock drew him to one side and gave careful instructions. "They're likely to ask you a lot of questions. Take your time to answer them. You'll be breathless and panting, because you've run all the way from town to bring the news and to get their help. If you can't think of a good answer tell them you don't know. You can say the fire was coming down Turkey Creek Avenue when you left and that it was spreading to the residence streets. But don't know too much. That's the safest way. You met

Bob Dodson and he asked you to come out for help."

"I'll say I met him just as I come out from my room fastenin' my suspenders," contributed Madden, entering into the spirit of it. "I'll say I lit a a shuck for Bald Knob an' only hit the high spots on the way."

"Good. Well, good luck to you." Scot gave him one more suggestion. "They may leave a man or two at the Ground Hog. If they do, try to lead them round to the north side of the shaft house. We'll creep up as close as we can and try to surprise them."

The reaction of Dodson's mine guards to the news that Piodie was on fire was exactly what the McClintocks had anticipated.

Madden, halted by the sentry, gasped out his message. In an incredibly short time the men were out of their bunks listening to it. Not the faintest gleam of suspicion touched the minds of one of them. Wasn't the proof of Madden's story written red in the sky for any of them to read? They plunged back into the bunk house and got into more clothes. As fast as they were ready the men went straggling downhill toward town. Much against his will they had elected a young teamster to stay on guard at the Ground Hog. Madden volunteered to stay with him on duty.

It was easy to lead the teamster round to the north side of the shaft house, from which point they

could better view the angry sky and speculate on the progress of the flames.

"Doggone it, tha's just my luck to be stuck up here whilst the rest of the boys go to town an' see the fun," the faithful guard lamented. "I wisht I'd joined the hook an' ladder comp'ny when I was asked, then I'd sure enough have to go."

Madden sympathized. It was tough luck. If he wasn't all tired out running from town he certainly would like to see the fire himself. Sure enough it was an A-1 fire.

They sat down on a pile of timbers that had been hauled up to the Ground Hog for sets to be used in underground work.

A man came round the corner of the shaft house and moved toward them. The guard caught sight of him and remembered what he was there for. He jumped up and pulled out a revolver.

"Keep back there!" he ordered excitedly.

The man moved evenly toward him, hands buried in his trousers pockets.

The guard backed away. "Who are you? Git back there. Hear me? Git back."

In a duel of wits the man who is certain of himself has the advantage of the one who is not sure. Scot McClintock did not lose a stride. His unhurried indolence radiated confidence.

"Want a little talk with you," he said quietly. "Thought probably——"

"Git back or I'll plug you. Sure will."

"Oh, no. No sense in that. Bob Dodson now——"

The teamster had backed to the wall. He did not know what to do. He could not shoot a man lounging toward him with his hands in his pockets. Perhaps Dodson had sent him, anyhow.

"Did Dodson——?"

The question died in his throat with a gasp of consternation. He recognized now this easy-mannered intruder as the redoubtable Colonel McClintock, and he was not sufficiently alert-minded to meet the situation. If the man had come at him six-shooter in hand, he would have known quickly enough what to do. But in the fraction of time given him he hesitated. McClintock was a big man in the state. The teamster was not sure how far Dodson would back him. He had been hired by Sloan to take orders and not to show initiative. Before he could make up his mind the chance was lost. A dozen men poured round the corner of the house.

Irritably he barked out a question: "What in Mexico you all doin' here?"

Colonel McClintock held out his hand smilingly. "Your six-gun please." Voice and eyes both carried an imperative.

The teamster clung to his long navy revolver. "Looky here. I'm in charge here. Dodson won't like you fellows hellin' around the Ground Hog."

His wandering eye took in the flushed sky, and found there a momentary inspiration. "Mebbe you don't know Piodie is burnin' up right now. You-all better light out for town."

McClintock did not answer in words. His steady eyes still held the man with the weapon. His hand was still extended. Reluctantly, against his own volition it seemed, the teamster's arm moved forward. He was still telling himself he did not intend to give up the six-shooter when Scot's fingers closed on the barrel.

The two stood a moment, eye to eye. The mine guard's hand dropped slowly from the butt of the weapon.

"You carry good life insurance, Colonel?" asked drily the old forty-niner.

McClintock divided his command. One third of the men he left with Byers in charge of the Ground Hog. The rest he took with him to the other claims that had been jumped. One of these was deserted. At another they found the guard asleep. The jumpers on Scot's claim surrendered at discretion to superior numbers. Those who had been left at Vicky's fired a few wild shots, but as soon as they learned that the Ground Hog had been captured they gave up with the honours of war.

The battle of Bald Knob had been won by the attackers with no casualties.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SLEUTHING

SCOT was called back to Carson on official business, so that it was Hugh who entrained for Austin to join Browning on his search for evidence. In the old days of the pony express the boy rider had seen Austin a score of times. It was in the heart of a desert that stretched six hundred miles from east to west, a desert walled in by the Rockies on one side and the Sierras on the other. The town lay huddled between the sides of a cañon which ran sharply up from the Reese River valley. Houses were built everywhere and anywhere, on ground so steep that one side of a house often had a story more than the other. It was a place of dirty sprawling shacks surrounded by dry dusty plains upon which no birds or wild beasts could be seen. The note of the place was its raw crudeness. For here, half a thousand miles from San Francisco, the first wave of Pacific Coast migration had spent itself.

Yet even Austin had its social amenities—its churches, its schools, its first-class French restaurant, its theatre, and its daily paper. When Samuel

Bowles of Springfield, Massachusetts, passed through the town in the middle 'sixties he found its barber shops as well equipped as those of New York and its baths as luxurious as continental ones.

Over a Chateaubriand with mushrooms, following a soup that could have been inspired only by a Gallic brain, Browning and McClintock sat at a small table in the famous French restaurant and discussed the problem before them. The lawyer had made small headway. He knew the date of William Thornton's death. The man had fallen down a shaft while drunk two weeks after the date of the contract which the Dodsons held. He had found no evidence of any irregularity. Nobody he had met recalled a visit made by the Dodsons to town, but in the ebb and flow of the camp's busy life they might have been here. For in the boom days hundreds of men drifted in and out each week.

Browning had worked at the court house. Hugh mixed with people at the post office and in saloons. A dozen times that day he turned the conversation upon Singlefoot Bill. He picked up a good deal of information about the habits of that eccentric character, but none of it seemed very much to the point. The first lead he struck was at the Mammoth Lager Beer Saloon, a big resort on the corner of Main and Virginia.

An old-timer had been telling a story about Thornton. After he had finished he pulled himself up and

ruminated. "Doggone it, that wasn't Singlefoot, either. It was his brother Chug."

This was news to Hugh. "Had he a brother?"

"Sure had." The old-timer chuckled. "Lived in cabins side by side an' didn't speak to each other for years. I reckon the good Lord never made two more contrary humans than Chug an' Singlefoot."

"Where's Chug now?"

"He's been daid two years." He referred the matter to another tobacco-stained relic. "When was it Chug died, Bill?"

Bill made a stab at the date. His friend promptly and indignantly disagreed with him. They argued the matter with acrimony, but Hugh learned nothing definite from the quarrel.

He remembered that newspaper editors are encyclopædias of information and departed from the saloon, even though he had read in an advertisement that "Votaries of Bacchus, Gambrinus, Venus, or Cupid can spend an evening agreeably at the Mammoth."

The editor made Hugh free of his files. He was not sure about the dates of the two old fellows' deaths. One had died about three months before the other, but he could not even tell which one had passed away first.

"They were alike as two peas from the same pod," he explained. "Both cranky, gnarled, and tough old

birds. Even their names were almost identical. One was Willis Thornton and the other William Thornton."

Hugh's eye quickened. He had an intuition that he was on the edge of an important discovery, though he could not guess what it was. He looked through the back files till he came to the issue of August 14th of two years earlier. A short story on the back page was the one he wanted. The last sentence of it sent a pulse of excitement beating through his blood. The story read:

OBITUARY

We regret to record the death of our esteemed fellow citizen William Thornton, due to an accident which occurred Thursday night while on his way home after an evening spent down town. It appears that Mr. Thornton must have strayed from the path in the darkness of the gulch and fallen down a deserted prospect hole. His head struck the rocks below and death was probably instantaneous. His body was discovered there next morning by Jim Simpkins who works a claim near by.

Thornton was one of the first settlers at Austin and has lived here ever since. He was an eccentric character and had become an institution of the town. His brother Willis Thornton, the well-known prospector called Singlefoot Bill, died last June, it will be recalled.

Hugh read the last sentence a second and a third time.

"His brother Willis Thornton, the well-known prospector called Singlefoot Bill, died last June . . . "

Either the reporter was in error or Hugh had

stumbled on a fact of prime importance, one that knocked the props out from under the whole Dodson case. For if Singlefoot Bill was Willis and not William, and if he had died in June and not in August, then he could not have relinquished his claim to the Dodsons on July 29th of the same year. The claimants must either have bought from "Chug" Thornton instead of Singlefoot, or else the paper was a forgery pure and simple. One phrase of the document stuck in Hugh's memory. The conveyor of the property had been referred to as "William Thornton, known as Singlefoot Bill." But surely "Chug" Thornton, before signing so important a paper, would have corrected an error so flagrant as a reference to himself as Singlefoot Bill. The fact that this mistake in identity had been allowed to stand pointed to forgery. Probably the Dodsons had learned the date of William Thornton's death, had never heard of his brother, and had jumped to the conclusion, just as Browning and Hugh had done, that he was the old prospector who had worked Bald Knob.

All of which reasoning was based on the hypothesis that the story he had just read was true as to facts. Hugh proceeded to run it down. He looked over the June files of the paper and found the obit of Willis Thornton. At least three times in the story he was referred to as Singlefoot. It even mentioned the fact that he had prospected for years at Piodie.

From the newspaper office Hugh went to the undertaker. That gentleman was drowning his sorrows at the Mammoth, but he was one of that class of drinkers whose mind is clear only when he has had a few drinks.

"Don't remember which was Willis and which William," he told Hugh, "but I know I buried Singlefoot in June and Chug in August. Whyn't you go out to the graveyard an' look up the tombstones?"

"That's good advice. I'll take it."

Hugh wandered through the bleak graveyard perched on the side of a hill across which the wind always seemed to sweep. He found the graves of the brothers, and above each a clapboard upon which had been lettered their names, cognomens, and the dates of their deaths. These, too, confirmed what he had learned from the paper and from the undertaker.

When Browning found out what Hugh had discovered he thumped the table in his room with an excited fist.

"We've got 'em right. We'll spring our surprise on Dodson, trap him out of his own mouth, and throw the case out of court before it ever goes to a jury," he cried.

CHAPTER XL

IN THE MESH OF HIS OWN NET

BUT after full discussion, the Bald Knob mine owners decided to let the case go to the jury. They wanted to put the Dodsons on record in order to make stronger a criminal action against them later.

The evidence of the plaintiffs consisted of testimony to the effect that Singlefoot Bill had worked the claims, that he had a patent, and that he had sold the properties to the Dodsons. The contract of sale itself was offered in evidence. Both Robert and Ralph Dodson gave supplementary evidence as to the conditions under which the contract was made. Their story was clear, concise, and apparently unshaken. The only fact which had apparently not been clearly established was that Thornton had ever patented the claims. The records did not show the patent, but it was urged that the papers had been destroyed in the big fire. Oral testimony was introduced to substantiate this contention.

Ralph Dodson was the last witness for the plaintiffs. He was a good witness, quiet, very certain of

his facts, smilingly sure of the issue. Plainly he had impressed the jury of farmers who were trying the case. They knew nothing of the history of the ground in dispute, and were ready to accept what they heard on its *prima facie* merits.

In cross-examination Browning asked a brisk and careless question. "You bought direct from this prospector Singlefoot Bill, Mr. Dodson?"

"Yes."

"Not from any of his heirs or assigns or creditors?"

"No. The contract shows that I bought from William Thornton, known as Singlefoot Bill, the man who originally located and worked the claims."

"Let me see. The date was——?"

"July 29th, 1867."

"Quite sure that was the day on which you bought from this Singlefoot Bill?"

"Yes. The contract shows that." Dodson spoke with contemptuous impatience.

"As I understand it, your title rests on the fact that you bought from William Thornton, known as Singlefoot Bill, on July 29th, 1867."

"Yes, and on the fact that we have since continued to hold the property without selling it."

"Bought from Singlefoot Bill himself, in person?"

"Yes. I've said so already twice."

"You were there when he signed the contract, Mr. Dodson?"

"Yes."

"Did he read it before signing?"

"Yes."

"Casually or carefully?"

"Very carefully. I remember how long he was reading it."

"You think he understood it all—knew exactly what he was doing?"

"Undoubtedly."

"That is all."

Dodson was surprised. He had expected a savage gruelling, a fierce attack on every point of his testimony. Instead of which the opposing lawyer had asked a few harmless questions and waved him aside.

Fifteen minutes later Ralph Dodson's face had faded to an ashen gray. Browning had proved by competent witnesses, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Singlefoot Bill was named Willis Thornton and not William Thornton, and that he was buried just six weeks before the date upon which it was claimed he had signed the contract.

The lawyer was now introducing evidence to prove that Singlefoot Bill had admitted three weeks before his death, before several witnesses, that he thought he would drop work on Bald Knob without patenting any of his prospects. Ralph was not listening to it. His face was a sneering mask, but inside he was a cauldron of seething emotion. What a fool he had been, yet how natural had been his folly. He had

made sure of the date of William Thornton's death and had obtained a specimen of his signature. This William was a prospector. He answered accurately the description of Singlefoot Bill. Who under Heaven could have guessed there was another Thornton to rise up from the dead and confront him with his guilt?

He knew the Bald Knob cases were lost. That was the least of a train of evils he had let loose on himself. For the first time he had been exposed to the public gaze as a crook. He had put himself within reach of the law. If his hired witnesses deserted him he might even go to the penitentiary.

But the emotion which predominated in him was not fear. It was hatred. As the trial progressed he saw clearly that Hugh McClintock had been the rock upon which his plans had shipwrecked, just as he had been the cause that had brought defeat to him when he ran for office and when he wooed Victoria Lowell. The fellow was for ever in his way. He blocked his vision so that he could find no pleasure in life. With all the bitterness of a vain man whose hopes and ambitions have been thwarted, he hated the man who had fought him to a standstill.

His hatred grew. For after the McClintocks and their friends had won the Bald Knob cases Ralph Dodson found his place in Nevada less secure. The big men at Virginia and Carson, so he chose to think, at least, were a bit less cordial to him. They could

forgive shady work if it were not exposed, but if it failed they had no sympathy for it. He had made many enemies, and now they rallied round the McClintocks. He and his brother were indicted for forgery and for conspiracy to defraud by uttering a forgery. The Katie Brackett was pinching out. It began to look as though the firm had over-extended itself financially. His bitterness centred on one man, the one he chose to think responsible for the accumulation of trouble that was heaping upon him.

His brother came to him and whispered in his ear. They were in the office of the Katie Brackett at the time. The yellow-dotted eyes dodged furtively about the room. They rested on a map of the Piodie mines, on a calendar, on the waste-paper basket, on a broken pane in the window, anywhere but in the eyes of the man to when he was mouthing a proposal.

For once Ralph did not want to meet his gaze. He listened sullenly. "I'll not have a thing to do with it—not a thing," he said at last. "It's too dangerous. We've got too many men already who can ruin us by talking. Better drop it."

"I'm not askin' you to mix up in it. But I'll tell you the truth. I'm scairt of that fellow. He'll send us to the pen sure as he's alive. I'll fix his clock. You keep out of it."

"I don't want to hear a word about it. Not a word. Understand. I've forgotten what you told me. You'd better forget it, too."

"Hmp! Mebbe you wantta go to serve time. I don't. With that fellow outa the way we'd be all right. You don't have to know a thing about it. I got a way to fix things. Sure have."

"Well, don't come to me about it. I'll not listen to a word."

Robert Dodson showed his bad teeth in an evil grin. He understood that he had been told to go ahead and play his own hand.

CHAPTER XLI

FROM THE JUNIPERS

TOMMIE the red-headed stayed after school to bring in kindling and a supply of piñon wood for the big drum stove in the centre of the room. Ever since his teacher had whipped him he had been her eager and willing slave. His eye was always alert to anticipate the needs of the slim, vital young woman he adored.

So wholly was his heart hers that Vicky was more touched than amused. He was a forlorn little orphan, sometimes underfed, she suspected, and she mothered him in such ways as she found possible. Perhaps she favoured him ever so little in the assignment of school privileges dear to children, such as letting him pass the water more often than she did others.

"I got kindlin' an' wood 'n everythin', teacher. What'll I do now?" he asked.

Vicky, working over next day's lessons at the desk, smiled her thanks. "That's all, Tommie. You're a great help. Run along home now."

"Must I?" he pleaded. "Can't I go home when you go?"

"No, Tommie. I've a lot of work to do yet. And you know you promised to clean up the yard for Mrs. Fenway."

Under pretense of seeing whether her pencil needed sharpening, Tommie sidled up to the desk close to his teacher. She knew what he wanted. If she had kissed him his masculine vanity would have been wounded, but the lonely child in him craved affection. Her arm slipped round his shoulder and she gave him a quick hug, scolding him a little at the same time because his coat was torn.

Tommie grinned and ran out of the building. A moment later she heard his carefree whoop outside.

It happened that the boy was at that particular stage of life when his imagination revelled in make-believes. It was impossible for him to walk home sedately along the path. He told himself he was Kit Carson, and he hunted Indians as he dodged through the sage toward town.

The young scout's heart gave a little jump of fear. For in the clump of junipers to which his stealthy steps had brought him two men lay stretched on the ground. One of them carried a rifle.

"I got it fixed," the other was saying, almost in a murmur. "Sent him a note from that li'l tiger cat the schoolmarm for him to come an' walk home with her. He'll be along sure."

Tommie recognized the man as Robert Dodson, the biggest figure in the camp's life.

"You'll protect me, Dodson? You'll not go back on me?"

"Sure we'll protect you—me'n Ralph both—to a finish."

"If you don't, by God, I'll peach on you sure."

"Sho! It's plumb safe. You do the job, then light out. No danger a-tall."

"All right. You c'n run along. I'll git him sure as he passes along that path," the man with the rifle promised.

"Don't you make any mistake. Get him right. No need to take any chances."

"I never missed at this distance in my life. He's my meat."

"Soon as you're sure of him light out an' come down Coyote Gulch. I got an alibi all ready for you."

Tommie, face ashen, his knees buckling under him, crept back on all fours out of the junipers. As soon as he had reached the open sage the fear in him mastered discretion. He ran wildly, his heart pumping furiously. Fortunately, he was by that time too far away to attract the attention of the two men.

Into the schoolroom he burst and flung himself on Vicky. One glance at his face told her that he was very frightened.

"What is it, Tommie?" she asked, her arms about his shaking body.

He gasped out his news. She went white to the lips. It seemed to her for a moment that her heart stopped beating. It must be Hugh McClintock they were ambushing. She guessed they were luring him to his death by means of a forged note from her.

What could she do? She must move quickly and surely. There were two ways to town from the schoolhouse, one by the cut, the other over the hill. The assassin was lying close to the point where these paths met. She could not watch both and reach Hugh in time to save him.

Vicky did not know where Hugh was nor how to find him with a warning. Five minutes loss of time in finding him might be fatal. She thought of Ralph Dodson. Was he implicated in this? Even so, she knew he would cry back if he knew the plot was discovered. He was always at his office at this time of day, and that office was at this edge of town. If she could get word to him . . .

"Listen, Tommie," she cried. "You know Mr. Dodson's office—Mr. Ralph Dodson. Go to him quick as you can and tell him to come to me—right away—at the cave-in where he rescued Johnny. Tell him he must come at once—that I need him now. Understand?"

Tommie nodded. Already she was leaving the building with him.

"You go by the cut, and if you see Hugh McClintock tell him what you've told me and that he's to stay in town, she explained.

"Yes 'm," Tommie said. "I'll 'member."

"Don't tell Mr. Dodson anything except that I want him just as soon as he can get to me."

"No 'm, I won't." His heart beat fast with excitement, but he crushed back the fear that mounted in him.

They separated. Tommie hurried along through the cut and Vicky climbed the hill to the summit. She knew that the man lying in the junipers could see her. If she had known exactly where he was, she would have gone straight to him and forced him to give up his plan by remaining at his side. But in the thick underbrush she knew there would be small chance of finding him.

At the brow of the hill she stopped and swept the path with her eyes. Nobody was coming toward her along it from town. Her heart was in a tumult of alarm. If Hugh came by the cut and Tommie failed to meet him or to impress him sufficiently of the danger, he would walk straight into the ambush prepared for him.

She was torn by conflicting impulses. One was to hurry down the hill to town with the hope of finding Hugh before he started. Another was to retrace her steps toward the junction of paths and wait for him there. Perhaps if the bushwhacker saw

her there he would not dare to risk a shot. But she rejected this as a vain hope. He could fire in perfect security from the brush and slip away in the gathering dusk without any likelihood of detection.

It was not in her nature to wait in patience while Hugh might be hurrying into peril. She turned and walked swiftly back along the path she had just climbed. The shadow of dusk was falling. Objects at a distance began to appear shadowy, to take on indistinctness of outline. The panic in her grew with the passing minutes. A pulse in her parched throat beat fast. Sobs born of sheer terror choked her as she stumbled forward.

She stopped, close to the tunnel where the little boy had been entombed. With all her senses keyed she listened. No sound came to her tortured brain, but waves of ether seemed to roll across the flat and beat upon her ears. She waited, horrible endless minutes of agonized distress. In a small voice she cried out to the man in the chaparral that she was watching him, that if he fired she would be a witness against him. But her hoarse voice scarce carried a dozen yards.

From out of the junipers a rifle cracked. She ran down the path blindly, in an agony of fright. Before she had taken three steps the rifle sounded again. A scream filled the dusk, a scream of fear and pain and protest.

The lurching figure of a man moved out of the

gloom toward the running girl. It stumbled and went down.

With a sob of woe Vicky flung herself down upon the prostrate body. "Hugh!" she cried, and the word carried all her love, fears, dreads, and terrors.

No sound came from the still form her arms embraced.

CHAPTER XLII

HUGH RIDES TO AN APPOINTMENT

BALD KNOB hummed with activities. The Ground Hog was taking out quantities of rich ore. On Vicky's claim the leasers had struck a vein which might or might not develop into a paying proposition. A dozen other shafts were going down and from the side of the hill a tunnel was progressing at a right angle toward the Ground Hog drift.

The fame of the new discovery had spread over the state and from all directions prospectors were stampeding to the diggings. A steady stream of wagons wound up and down the hill. They brought to the camp flour, bacon, whisky, coal oil, dynamite, canned goods, clothing, lumber, chickens, honey, hay, and the thousand other staples needed by the young camp. Stores at Piodie set up branch establishments in tents and flimsy shacks. Other merchants came in from Eureka and Virginia. Freight outfits moved bag and baggage to Bald Knob, wagons loaded to the side boards with supplies. Gamblers and women of loose reputation

joined the rush, keen to help reap the harvest always ripe in a young live mining camp.

The most important and the busiest man in the new camp was Hugh McClintock. He was a third owner of the Ground Hog and he had claims of his own in addition. He managed the teaming and contracting business of himself and his brother, now with temporary headquarters at Budd & Byers corral. Moreover, he was looked on as unofficial father of the camp. To him came drifters out of work, men who proposed the incorporation of a town in the saddle of the dromedary-backed hill, solicitors for contributions to an emergency hospital, and scores of others who had troubles or difficulties they wanted to unload.

On the afternoon of a sunny day came to him also a barefoot Negro boy with a note. The note read:

> Are you awf'ly busy, Hugh? I want to see you. Meet me at the schoolhouse at five-thirty to-day. Be sure and come. It is very important.
>
> VICKY LOWELL.

If Vicky said it was important for him to meet her, he knew she was not overstressing it. That young woman was impulsive and sometimes imperious, but it was not in her character to call a busy man from his work without a valid reason. It was her custom to stay at the schoolhouse and prepare the lessons for next day so that she might have

the evenings free to read or to go out with friends. Twice he had gone out to the schoolhouse and walked home with her in order to talk over some difficulty that had arisen in regard to the leasing of her claim. But he had gone of his own volition and not at her request.

There were moments during the afternoon, while he was talking over business matters with the people who poured into his office, when his pulses quickened delightfully, when he was aware of an undertug of excitement coursing through his blood. Was it possible that Vicky sent for him because—because she cared for him?

He rejected this, too, as out of character, as a kind of treason to her. She was proud and held her self-respect in high esteem. Even if she cared for him she would let him travel the whole road to her. Her lover must come out into the open and ask for all he hoped to gain.

There had been hours of late when Hugh's heart had been lifted with hope, hours when their spirits had met in the mountain tops and they had rejoiced in the exploration of each other's minds. The mentality of girls was a *terra incognita* to him. He had lived among men from his youth. Never before had he met a soul so radiant, so quick with life, so noble in texture, as hers, he told himself. The glamour of her personality coloured all his thoughts of her. The lift of her throat as she would turn the

beautifully poised little head, the dark flash of her eyes so mobile in expression, the soft glow of colour in her clear complexion, even the intellectual quality of her immature thinking, went to his head like strong wine.

He was in love, with all the clean strength of his nature—and he rejoiced in his love and let it flood his life. It permeated all his actions and thoughts, quickened his vitality. Because he had gone so far in life sufficient to himself the experience was wonderful and amazing to him. His imagination halted at the threshold of his house of dreams. He dared not let it take free rein. He would tell himself humbly that this golden girl was not for him, and next moment he was planning how he might see her soon and what he would say to her.

He was detained a few moments by a business detail that had to be settled with a foreman, and after that a committee of citizens met in his office to decide about the organization of a fire department for the camp. He was on edge to be gone, but he could not very well walk out from a meeting he himself had called. When at last he got away he knew that he was nearly fifteen minutes late for his appointment with Vicky.

Knowing that he would be rushed for time, he had ordered a saddle horse to be in waiting outside the office. He cantered down the road, pretending not to hear the shout of an old prospector who wanted to

discuss a lease with him. To-morrow would do well enough for Tim Murphy, anyhow. The important business of his life just now was to get to Miss Vicky Lowell as soon as his horse could cover the intervening miles.

He travelled fast. It was only a few minutes later when he rode down Turkey Creek Avenue at a gallop. He did not stop the horse in town, but passed through it to the suburb at the farther edge of which the school had been built.

Carelessly, without any special interest, he saw a man entering the cut two hundred yards in front of him. He glanced at his watch. The time was 5:49. He would be more than twenty minutes late for his appointment with Vicky.

Hugh rode into the cut. Halfway through it he pulled up his horse abruptly. The crack of a rifle had stopped him automatically. He swung from the saddle and eased the revolver in its scabbard. The sound of another shot echoed in the cut. A scream shrilled through the dusk.

He tied the horse to a sapling with a slip knot and stepped forward. He guessed that murder had been done. The shriek that still rang in his brain had come from a man in mortal agony. Warily as a panther he moved, for he knew the murderer had a rifle, and against a rifle at a hundred yards a forty-five is as effective as a popgun.

Hugh edged round the corner of the bend beyond

the cut. Instantly caution vanished. In the gathering gloom a woman was flying down the road toward him. She flung herself down to gather up in her arms a figure lying sprawled across the path. McClintock broke into a run. Even in the growing darkness he had recognized that light and lissom form.

"Vicky!" he cried as he reached her.

A face bloodless to the lips looked up pitifully at him. In the eyes he read amazement, incredulity, doubt. Then, quite without warning, the girl quietly toppled over in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE SACRIFICE

VICKY floated back to consciousness and a world that for a moment did not relate itself to her previous experience. Hugh McClintock's arms were round her, his anxious face looking into hers. The touch of the night wind was in the air, and apparently she was lying on the ground.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You fainted," he explained.

"Oh!" she said vaguely. Then her eyes fell upon the still body stretched beside her. Her memory picked up lost threads again and she shuddered. "I—I thought—it was you." She clung to him, her arms round him, as though she had not yet fully escaped from the horror that had held her.

"Thought it was me?" he said, and there was not such a thing as grammar in the world just then. "Why should you think that?"

"They meant to—to—kill you. One of my little boys heard them." She began to sob softly into his coat.

Hugh's arms tightened about her. His body

glowed with a soft warm happiness. He had never known Vicky before unstrung and helpless. It was golden luck for him that he should be the man to whom she clung.

"How could they know I'd be here?" he asked gently.

"Didn't you get a note? Bob Dodson wrote it."

"A decoy, to bring me here?"

"Yes. They pretended it was from me."

She disengaged herself from his arms. The instinct of sex defence against even the favoured lover was reasserting itself.

Hugh tried to put the bits of the puzzle together. His eyes fell upon the dead body at his feet. "Then —this man—they must have shot him in place of me."

"Yes," her dry throat gasped out.

McClintock stooped to feel the heart. It did not beat. He turned the body for a look at the face. Then, "God!" he cried.

The face that stared up at him with sightless eyes was the face of Ralph Dodson.

Vicky wailed in distress. "Oh, Hugh! I did it. I killed him! I brought him here."

"How? What do you mean?"

She caught her hands together in a gesture of despair. "I sent Tommie for him—told him to come. I wanted him to save you."

Hugh looked down at the face of the man who had

hated him so bitterly. His face muscles twitched. He was greatly touched.

"He died in my place—to save me," he said gently.

"No. I didn't tell him what I wanted him for—only that I wanted him right away. And he came—and——" She broke down utterly. Innocently she had been the cause of the death of a man who loved her. Without thought she had lured him into the ambush his own brother had prepared for his enemy.

The arms that went round her were those of Old Dog Tray and not those of her lover. Hugh comforted her as best he could.

"You're not to blame—not in the least. The men who contrived my murder are guilty of his death. You called on him for help. That's all. He had lots of sand. Even if he had known what would happen to him he would have come to you. That's the way game men are. They go through. If he were here and could speak to you he wouldn't blame you—not a bit of it. He'd say it was just the luck of the day."

"Yes, but—but——"

His voice went on, cheerful, even, matter of fact. The very sound of it banished despair. Her sobs diminished.

He led her to his horse.

"What—what'll we do with—him?" she asked.

"I'll arrange that when I get to town," he told her.

Hugh made a foot rest of his hand and Vicky climbed to the saddle. He walked along the path beside her.

Once his hand went up comfortingly to find and press hers in the darkness.

She whispered, in a small voice she could not make quite steady, "You're so good to me."

He did not answer. What could he say, except that if it would help her he would cheerfully let red Indians torture him? And that somehow did not seem an appropriate reply.

CHAPTER XLIV

UNDER THE STARS

ROBERT DODSON, appalled at the horrible thing he had done, fled with his accomplice during the night. They reached Reno, were hidden on the outskirts of the town by a friend, and crossed the Sierras furtively to California. Here the trail was lost. Nobody was very anxious to find it, for Dodson carried with him his own punishment.

Years later a man from Virginia City met in a San Francisco dive a drunken wreck who reminded him of the fugitive. He called him by name, but the man shrank from him, slid to the door, and disappeared into the night. This was the last time Dodson was ever recognized. A rumour floated to Nevada that he died of yellow fever soon after this in Mexico, but no proof of this was ever given out.

The Dodson fortune collapsed with the death of Ralph. The firm had over-extended its operations and a tight money market closed it out. If Ralph had lived he might have been able to weather the storm, but without his guiding hand the Dodson

properties became liabilities instead of assets. A sheriff's sale of the mines paid creditors almost in full.

The death of Ralph was the nine-days talk of the town. From the evidence of red-headed Tommie it was clear that he had directly or indirectly approved of the plan to make away with Hugh McClintock. Most Christians felt it to be a judgment of Providence that he had stepped into the trap prepared for his enemy. The pagans of the community voted it a neat piece of luck for Hugh and buried Dodson complacently and without regrets.

Hugh had been summoned by business out of town the morning after the tragedy and did not return for nearly a week. He called on Vicky the evening of the same day.

Both of them were ill at ease and self-conscious. Vicky felt that she ought to be mistress of the situation, but she could not get out of her mind the memory of how she had clung to this man and sobbed in his arms.

The conventional parlour, with its plush album, its shell ornaments, and its enlarged photographs of Jim Budd and his wife, stifled all Hugh's natural impulses. He had never learned how to make small talk.

"Whew! It's hot here. Let's take a walk," he blurted out at last.

"I want to borrow a book from Mrs. Sinclair. We might walk up there," Vicky said.

As Vicky moved up Turkey Creek Avenue beside this strong and self-contained man she marvelled at herself for ever having thought him the Old Dog Tray type. The lights from the saloons and gambling houses flashed on a face that had stirred her imagination. He never posed or played to the gallery. He never boasted. He never made the heroic gesture. Yet she knew him for one among ten thousand, first among all the men she had met. He was clean and simple and direct, yet it had come about that he held in his keeping the romance of her life. He was the prince in shining armour she had dreamed about from her childhood.

They walked up the street toward the suburbs of the town. As they passed the Sacramento Storage Warehouse the girl, eager to keep up a desultory conversation, nodded at the alley.

"Mr. Budd told me that was where the man Dutch shot at you one night," she said.

"Yes. He waited for me as I passed. Missed three shots."

She shuddered. Even now she did not like to think of the dangers through which he had come to her in safety.

"All past," he said cheerfully. "Strange, when you come to think of it. All our enemies, Scot's and mine, dead or driven out. Yet from first to last all we ever did was to defend ourselves."

They came to the end of the road, as he had done

on that other night to which she had referred. They looked up into the stars and the clean wonder of the night took hold of them. The blatant crudeness of Piodie, its mad scramble for gold and for the pleasures of the senses, faded for this hour at least from their lives. The world had vanished and left them alone—one man and one woman.

When at last he spoke it was quite simply and without any introduction to what was in his mind.

"There's never been any woman but you in my life. Even when you were a li'l trick and I bought that first doll for you—even then I was getting ready to love you and didn't know it."

"I've got that doll yet. It's the *dearest* doll," she said softly, the adjective flashing out as words were wont to do in her childhood.

He smiled. "And the black doll—have you that?"

"Yes, I have that, too. I just loved the boy that sent it to me."

"Do you love the man he's grown into, Vicky?"

"Yes." She said it bravely, without any pretence of doubt. She was proud of her love. The truth was too fine to cloud with any feminine sinuosities.

He drew a deep long breath of joy. His dreams had come true.

With the stars as witnesses they plighted troth to each other.

THE END

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